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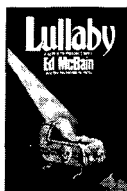
BARGAIN GETAWAY

A Tale of a
Murderous Vacation
by Stephen Wasylyk

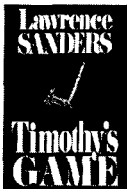
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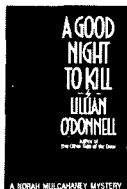
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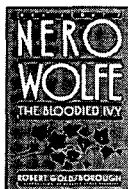
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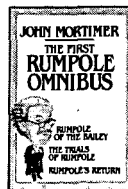
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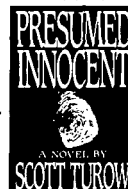
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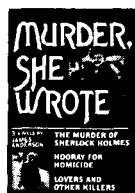
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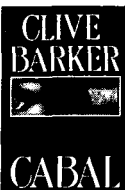
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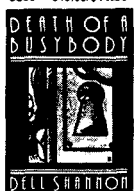
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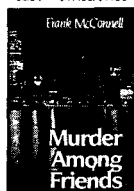
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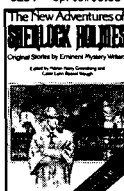
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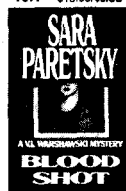
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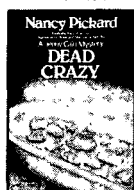
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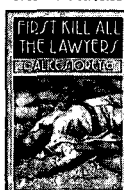
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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Notes about upcoming events: In Washington, D.C., from April 21-23, a mystery weekend called Malice Domestic will take place at the Sheraton Northwest Washington Hotel, "a celebration of crime in the grand tradition of Agatha Christie." Guest of Honor will be Phyllis Whitney; toastmaster, Robert Barnard. Membership is \$60 through April 10, 1989; at-the-door memberships will cost more (if they're available). Awards will be announced—the Agathas, of course—and various activities are planned, including a banquet, an afternoon tea, and a treasure hunt. For further information, write to Malice Domestic, P.O. Box 1753, Frederick, Maryland 21701.

In May, as always, the annual Edgar Awards dinner will take place in New York. This

year it's scheduled for Thursday, May 11. We hope to have additional information about that and the other events surrounding it in the next issue; in the meantime, if you'd like to attend, send an inquiry to Mystery Writers of America, 236 West 27th Street, New York, New York 10001.

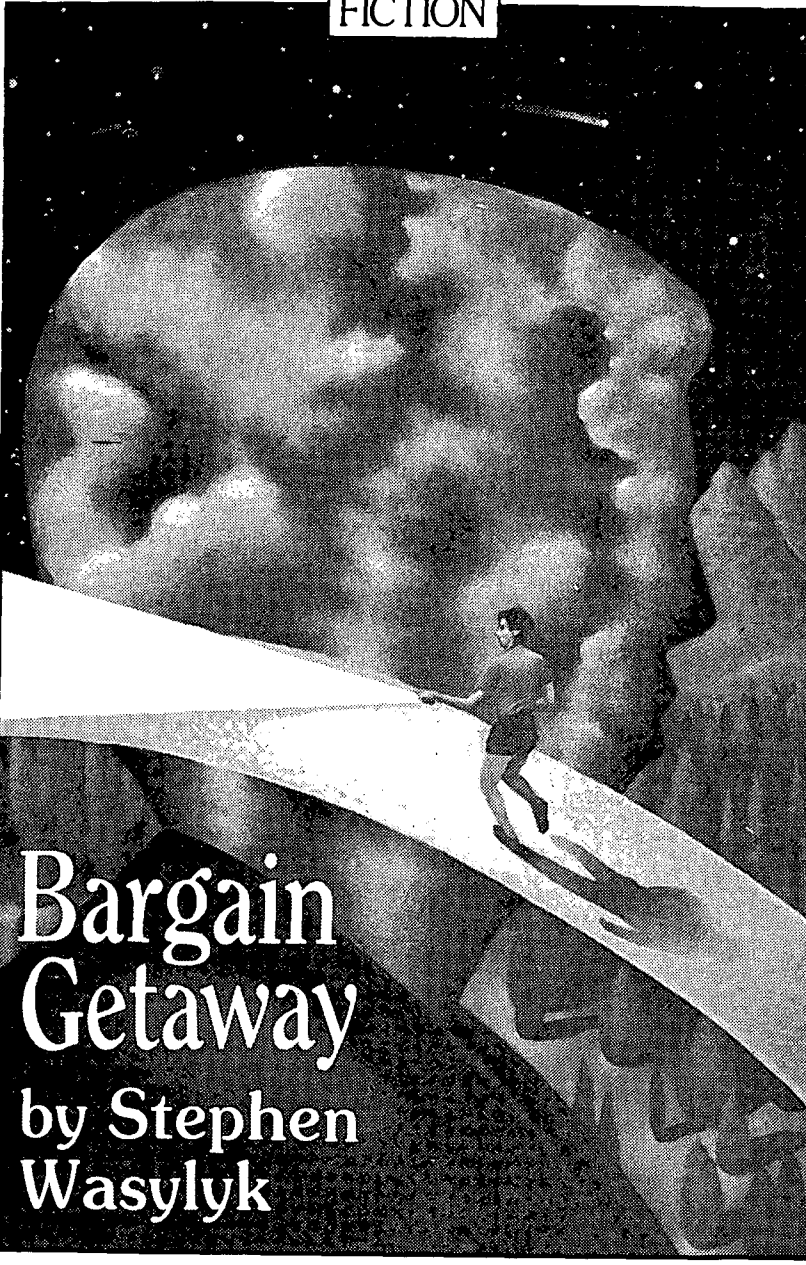
And it's not too soon to begin thinking about Bouchercon XX, the annual convention of mystery writers and fans. This year's convention will take place in Philadelphia; the dates are October 6-8. It will be held at the Society Hill Sheraton Hotel, and Simon Brett will be the Guest of Honor. Membership is \$40—again, if available—and it may be a good idea to send it in as soon as possible if you plan to attend. Write to Bouchercon XX, P.O. Box 59345, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19102-9345.

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FICTION



Bargain Getaway

by Stephen
Wasylyk

Illustration by Mark Fresh

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Hands clasped behind my head, wishing for the familiar lumpiness of my own bed, I was wide awake when the woman screamed. The covers went back, my feet hit my slippers, and my hand snatched up the flashlight. Three seconds later I was out in the cold of the moonless Colorado night.

In the starshine, the gravel road in front of my sister's so-called cabin was a dirty gray, the tall pines beyond it a wall of black. Underbrush crackled. I thumbed the light switch in time to catch the green sheen of what might have been a nylon jacket before it disappeared among the trees.

Thirty yards away, a darker blotch showed on the gray of the gravel. I aimed the flashlight and sprinted down the beam. The blotch was a woman wearing a heavy jacket, lying on her side with her knees drawn up and her hands clutching her stomach below the spreading stain on her white uniform. The face was middle-aged, the tightly curled, too-yellow hair as wild as loose mattress stuffing, and she had died in those seconds it had taken me to reach her.

Other flashlight beams joined mine, pooling her in light, excited voices behind them tumbling out words that collided and overlapped.

"What" . . . "Ada Donaldson" . . . "is she" . . . "ohmy" . . . "awful" . . . "dead" . . . "looks like Porter killed" . . . "God" . . . "phoned sheriff" . . . "here in minutes" . . .

Thirty seconds would have been a better estimate. Flashing rooflights were in sight and coming fast.

The words ended suddenly as a flashlight beam swung to me. "Who's this?"

The answer was slightly contemptuous. "Sarah Cameron's brother. He's here on vacation."

I first thought the contempt was an opinion of my physique, but a sudden shiver changed that. Even in midsummer the nights could be quite cold at this altitude, and only a fool or an outsider would run out dressed in a pair of shorts. I had just been classified as both, and rightly so. The corpse was probably warmer than I was.

I lifted a hand and smiled weakly. With a superhuman effort, I kept my teeth from chattering as I said, "Good night," and sprinted for the warmth of the cabin. The woman, after all, was no concern of mine. Hypothermia was.

I sloshed an inch of Roger's good sipping whisky into a glass, slipped into a robe, set up the electric perk, and peeked out occasionally at the headlight beams and flashlights up the road. I really should have con-

centrated on the whisky and forgotten the coffee. Sarah had done it again. She'd made me break my rule of never letting her talk me into anything, because whenever she did, I ended up in trouble.

The rule had its origin at age twelve. Sarah, who took part in every after-school activity George Washington High offered except football and Greco-Roman wrestling, persuaded me to carry her schoolbag home while she went to Glee Club practice.

I wasn't so stupid as to believe that a skinny, bespectacled kid with little fighting ability—*no* fighting ability—could carry a pink, beflowered-with-daisies schoolbag through one of the toughest parts of South Philadelphia without suffering consequences, but even at fifteen, she was capable of selling an aluminum siding job to the White House.

I can still hear my mother wailing, "*He's going to die!*," while my father reassured me with, "A broken nose can sometimes improve a man's looks, Kevin," as he attempted to staunch the blood.

Never again, I'd promised myself. Aside from a few minor slips, I'd stuck with it until last week.

Where are you going on your

vacation? she'd asked. Her voice was too sweet and too concerned, which brought a suspicious, what-in-the-hell-do-you-care from me. You could come out here, she said. Half the country would give its right arm for a vacation in the glorious Rockies, and it wouldn't cost you a thing except airfare. I feel sorry for you, stuck in that dirty, polluted city. Think of it. Fresh mountain air—Forget it, I said. I don't like you and I don't like your husband. Roger's too goodlooking, too smart, and he makes more money than I do. I never could understand why they pay him so much to walk around poking holes in the ground, when a gang of delinquents would do it for nothing. I sure as hell am not spending a week with you. For your information, she said, a geologist does much more than poke holes into the ground, but don't worry, we won't be here. You'll have the place to yourself. We'll be on vacation in Hawaii. *Hawaii? You just said half the country would give its right arm for a vacation there and you're going to Hawaii?* We're in the other half, she said. Be practical. This is better than winning an expense-free vacation on a game show. The IRS won't sock you for the tax on the value. Plenty of food in the house, nothing to do but

sleep, fish, go for long walks among the quaking aspens, and sit on a mountaintop contemplating the universe. Ideal for a loner like you. I'll even pick you up at Stapleton in Denver so you don't have to rent a car. Maybe I'll consider it, I said. I was sure you would, she said. You're too cheap to turn down a deal like this.

I told myself it was the line about sitting on a mountaintop contemplating the universe that got me, but deep in my heart I knew she was right. I was too cheap to turn the deal down, even though I also knew that listening to her always led to disaster.

I finished the whisky and poured the coffee. Until she'd called, I'd been planning a week at an expensive resort with a heated swimming pool and dozens of high-temperated bikini-clad maidens panting for summer romance. Thanks to her, I'd saved a little money, but I'd started off this bargain getaway by freezing my rear end off while looking down at a murdered woman. I couldn't see how things would get much better.

Murdering someone in a mountain village called Pickswing, where the clustered population was about two hundred, when you had Lord knows how many thousands of

unoccupied square miles to select from, seemed to indicate someone had made an alcohol-fueled, spur of the moment decision.

Great neighbors, Sarah. Remind me never to come back.

The door quivered under an attack of hard-fisted knocking.

Broad-brimmed hat in hand, the man stepped in when I opened it.

"Hi," he said. "Thought you might be asleep. I'm Bubba Zablonski, the sheriff."

He was big enough to begin with, but the bulky tan jacket made him look like something out of *The Invasion of the Alien Giants*, if the Alien Giants came with close-cut blond hair and a face as rugged as the mountain across the road.

"I thought only football players were named Bubba," I said.

His eyes were on the coffee cup in my hand. "Tackle, University of Colorado. You have any more of that stuff? Sure would be appreciated."

He threw his hat on a chair and zipped open the jacket.

"They tell me you found the body."

I poured his coffee. "I didn't find it. I just got there first because I didn't take time to put on clothes."

He grinned. "I heard about that. Before the cold got to you, did you see anything?"

"Some crackling in the brush and a glimpse of what could have been a green nylon jacket through the trees. At least it reflected light. Trees don't."

He held the cup in both hands. "Neither do animals," he said thoughtfully. "Too bad you didn't go after it."

"In my shorts? Drink your coffee."

He sipped. "Then what?"

"I saw the body. So did a lot of other people a minute later. Who was she?"

"Ada Donaldson. She was a waitress at the bar out on the highway. You may have noticed it when you drove in. She was walking home. She and her husband Porter lived in the cabin at the end of the row."

He finished the coffee. I wondered how. Mine was still too hot.

"Look, it's two o'clock. Why don't I come back in the morning? You can show me where you saw this jacket and we'll take a look."

I shrugged. "Fine. I suppose you'll bring along Moosehead Joe, the celebrated tracker, who will steadfastly follow the trail of broken twigs and overturned leaves until he brings the evil perpetrator to justice."

He grinned. "Your sister was right. She said you were a little weird but to ignore it because basically you were a nice per-

son who found life a little confusing."

I hoped Sarah picked up a heavy case of sunburn at Wai-kiki Beach.

He arrived just as I retrieved my lone, soft-boiled egg from the boiling water, considering it with a frown. "That your breakfast?"

"Plus two pieces of toast."

"Good Lord. Not for me. Since I haven't eaten yet, I know Sarah won't mind."

He stripped off his jacket and rooted through the refrigerator. He must have spent time as a short order cook somewhere, because I hadn't chewed my way through my second piece of dry toast when he slid a steaming plate onto the table opposite me and dropped into the chair.

I stared at four fried eggs, six pieces of bacon, and a generous mound of home fries, reinforced by four slices of toast limp with melted butter.

"Congratulations," I said. "You've created a breakfast of everything that is bad for you."

He attacked the home fries. "You one of these food freaks?"

"I eat sensibly."

"For your time and place, I suppose you do. The only exercise you get is walking to your car, so that one-egger might get

you through to lunch. If it doesn't, you can always run across the street to the coffee shop. Right?"

"We have a cafeteria in the basement," I said coldly.

"Well, life is a bit more strenuous here, there is no cafeteria in the basement, and I'm never sure when my lunch break will be. To start the day hungry would be asinine."

"I was commenting on quality, not quantity. Fats, nitrates—"

He mopped up egg yolk with a piece of toast on the end of his fork and popped it into his mouth. "Yeah, but just think of how great it all tastes. Sarah says you're a cop."

"How is it that Sarah seems to have spent half her time telling you about me? If you're having an affair with her, I guarantee I'll spill the beans to Roger."

"Roger and I do a lot of fishing and hunting together. I'm like one of the family."

"Not my half. Sarah is confused as usual. I'm not a cop. I'm a forensic specialist in the coroner's office."

"Ah. We do nicely without one of those."

"I'll bet you do."

He finished the last piece of toast.

"Look, you find someone dead and you have to start narrow-

ing down a million people, not counting tens of thousands who run in and out of the city each day. I have two hundred in the village and about three to every square mile in the county outside. Everyone not only knows everyone, but also their business. Sure, there's some inter-gender sneaking around, even some same-gender sneaking around, but it all surfaces eventually. Someone gets killed, I'm usually down to one or two people immediately, and as a rule, just one. All I have to look for is corroborative evidence to prove something I already know."

I heard the voice last night saying, "*Looks like Porter killed her.*"

"So you've already settled on her husband."

"Well, we know they've been arguing. Witnesses say he was in the bar last night half bombed and giving her a hard time, and I can't locate him anywhere. That was probably him you saw in the trees. My guess is he's hiding out in one of those abandoned mines on the mountain so I'm going up there after him."

"Just like that. Without examining the scene in daylight, without a coroner's report, without knowing the weapon used."

He smiled, scooped up the

dishes and carried them to the sink. "Oh, I'd planned to give the scene a quick look and take a few photographs to back up those from last night. If you think your expertise can contribute something, I'm in no hurry. If Parker's up there, he'll keep. His car is in the drive and no one gets around out here without transportation. Interested? Sarah said you liked to poke your nose into everything."

I really should have told him to stuff his murder in his ear. I didn't, which proved Sarah was right again. I did like to poke my nose into everything.

"Mind if I ask a question?"

"About the murder?"

"About a possible murder." I indicated the loaded sink. "You leaving all of that for me?"

"Don't worry about it. You have all week to get it done."

Now I knew why he and Sarah were such great friends. She'd always had the same attitude toward dirty dishes.

The road was about a quarter mile long, gouged out of the forest at the edge of the village, and coming off at right angles from the highway. The six cabins were spaced out along one side, inserted about forty feet deep into the trees. If you wanted something so luxurious as a

lawn, you dragged out a chain saw and created it yourself.

Sarah's cabin was third from the end.

If you have children and one grows up to be president, he or she can always lay claim to being born in a log cabin, I told her. Not much of a campaign plus, she said. It's a log house, not a cabin. Warm in winter, cool in summer and with every modern convenience inside. Lincoln should have had it so good.

The gravel crunched beneath our feet as we walked to where the body was found. Her clothing had absorbed the bleeding, so there was little to show a woman had died there except for a rough semicircle of ridged gravel about three feet in diameter.

"What makes you so sure her husband killed her?"

"The first thing I did was go down to the house. The door was unlocked, there were a half dozen empty beer bottles on the kitchen table, and one of Porter's rifles was missing. The way I see it, he met her as she left the bar to continue the argument. He was bombed and, while walking home, lost control and killed her. He probably intended to take off." He pointed out a brown Jeep parked before the cabin at the end. "But you charged out in your designer

skivvies and he had to hit the trees to go around you. This is a dead end road. When he saw he couldn't get the Jeep past the crowd, he grabbed his rifle and headed for the hills."

"He could have come back for the car after everything settled down."

He grinned. "He may have, but I took the keys last night. He's up there and he'll stay there. The state police have the roads sealed off, so working his way to a highway and catching a ride would be a waste of time." He looked up at the mountain. "To tell the truth, I'm a little baffled. Porter is no dummy. He knows I'm coming after him and he has nowhere to run. I really expected him to come in. They usually do. I can't figure out what he's up to."

It all seemed too cut and dried. I closed my eyes and tried to bring back what I had paid no attention to the night before. When I'd sprinted, shivering, for the warmth of the house, I felt I'd seen a dark shape and heard gravel crunching ahead of me.

"What was the argument about?"

He shrugged. "What else? He accused Ada of being too friendly with the customers. Greeley Carstairs in particular, but then Greeley's been a thorn in the side of a lot of husbands. He's

the type who goes through life keeping score. Ordinarily, I'd consider Ada out of his league. You probably didn't get a good look at her, but she was a rather big woman and no beauty, not the type Greeley generally went for. If there *was* something there, the rumor mill hadn't come up with anything more than speculation, and Greeley's reputation probably gets him more credit than he deserves." He shrugged again. "But you never know."

"Anyone else in that category?"

"Hanson Michaels runs Greeley a close second."

I looked at the semicircle in the gravel. "How big is Porter?"

"Remember that nursery rhyme about Jack Spratt and his wife? Based on Ada and Porter. On tiptoe, he might come up to her earlobe."

"And the local Romeos?"

"If both played football, they'd be called Bubba."

"Where were they when Ada was killed?"

"At the exact moment, I have no idea. They were in the crowd last night, but so was everyone else."

"Except Porter."

"Makes sense. If you killed your wife, wouldn't you run?"

It was my turn to shrug.

I knelt. The dusty shoulder had been churned by many feet,

no clear print showing. I stepped over it into the yard-wide band of weeds that separated the road from the trees.

"Take a look," I said.

Bubba joined me.

Crosslighted by the early morning sun, crushed weeds showed where someone had moved through the night before, starting where the body had been found and angling sharply into the trees before Sarah's cabin.

"Mr. Green Jacket," I said. "You should photograph this now. An hour or two in the sun and most of those weeds will be upright again."

"I can do that, but why? I already said he probably left the road to avoid you."

"Yeah, you did say that. Take the picture anyway, and while you have the camera, take a shot of that."

I pointed to the semicircle in the gravel.

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"I'm not sure, but it wasn't made by someone dancing."

I left him taking the photographs.

At the spot where the trail hit the trees, the shaded earth was damp enough to retain the print of a heavy, cleated shoe. I knelt. Small pieces of gravel had been caught between the cleats, and the heel was so

worn it was rounded.

I called Bubba over. "I suppose you can make a cast of this."

"Sure, but it's bound to be Porter's."

"And if it isn't?"

"If it isn't, I'll have the cast bronzed and present it to you after the trial."

He used the radio in his four wheel drive for a moment before coming back with a wooden box painted a bright yellow. He carefully centered it over the print and pressed it down firmly.

"My deputy will take care of it. I have to tell you that I would have done this anyway, so we're even up to this point."

I smiled. "I doubt it. Let's go down to Porter's house."

The road ended like its sides. Perhaps thirty feet beyond the house, the gravel petered out into a strip of dirt and a band of weeds.

The gravel of the driveway had been confined by several small logs laid end to end, grass and weeds growing up to them and into the trees. If Porter had fled for the hills with his rifle, he'd stepped on nothing that marked his passage.

"Ready to give up?" asked Bubba.

"I'd like to see the body."

He grinned. "Sarah said that once you got hold of something, you wouldn't let go."

The coroner was a bald-headed doctor named Morris, so slim, trim, and pink-skinned he reminded me of an author's picture I had seen on the dust jacket of a book entitled *Eat Your Way to Happiness, Wellness and Sexual Potency with Salad Greens*. I'd felt like a rabbit by the time I'd reached Chapter Two.

"What would you like to know?"

"Your opinion of the type of weapon and the angle of entry."

"Standard hunting knife with a four, four and a half inch blade, straight in. Anything else?"

"I'd like to see her."

Bubba's description hadn't been off the mark. She may have been a helluva waitress and a very nice woman, but she was no sex symbol.

I indicated discolorations on her lower throat. "What do you think caused those?"

"Could be an arm around her neck."

"Anything under her fingernails?"

He looked at Bubba. "Why should I bother with that?"

Bubba smiled. "Ask him, not me."

"If someone clamped an arm around her neck, she'd try to claw it away," I said. "Unless he was wearing a suit of armor,

she'd have picked up something under her nails."

He growled something about wasting time when he had live patients waiting and said, "Wait in the office."

Fifteen minutes later, he handed Bubba a glassine envelope.

"My guess is nylon, but send it to the state police for analysis." He glared at me. "Everyone in the whole damned state must have a nylon jacket, including Porter."

"And a hunting knife with a four, four and a half inch blade," I said.

He frowned at Bubba. "Are you sure this wiseass is Sarah's brother?"

"Forget that, Bubba," I said.

"Just tell me why everyone refers to me as Sarah's brother and not Roger's brother-in-law."

"For the same reason everyone refers to Roger as Sarah's husband." He smiled. "Does that surprise you?"

"Come to think of it, no. Mother and Dad were always referred to as Sarah's parents. How long did it take before everyone in the village knew the Queen of Busybodies?"

"If I remember right, about three days. Anything more here?"

"Not at the moment."

"Good. Now that you've had your turn, it's mine. I'm going

after Porter. Want to come along?"

"Hell, no. I didn't come here to climb around on a mountain looking for a suspected killer."

He turned to Morris. "You could be right, doc. He might be an impostor. Sarah said her brother never backed away from a challenge in his life, not even carrying a pink schoolbag through one of the toughest neighborhoods in the city."

I could never understand how she always managed to get other people to help herd you along, much less do it from more than three thousand miles away.

We left the four wheel drive on the rutted road that curled up the mountain in a tunnel under the trees, climbing on foot to a sloping natural clearing covered with flower speckled meadow grass and strewn with an assortment of boulders. Pickswing was a cluster of white dots along the black ribbon of the highway in the valley, brown sawtooth peaks on the other side backed by the bluest sky I'd ever seen.

I leaned back against a head-high boulder to catch my breath, thinking that what John Denver was singing about in "Rocky Mountain High" was an oxygen deficiency.

"You wait here," said Bubba. "I think he's holed up in an abandoned mine off to our left.

I'll circle up and come down at him from above. He won't be expecting that."

Twa-a-a-n-g!

The bullet blasted a shower of chips from the boulder. By the time they hit the ground we were both huddled behind it.

I swallowed hard. "He sure as hell was expecting something, Bubba. Since we have nothing to do but sit here shivering with terror, it might be an appropriate time to ask a few questions. Like, why didn't you get the state police to send a helicopter to locate him? Like, why didn't you form a posse or something? Like, why in the hell did you decide you needed me for company?"

He peered around the side of the boulder. "Porter isn't a state police problem. He's mine. Stop worrying. He's not going to shoot us."

Twa-a-a-n-g! Dust drifted down on us.

"Of course he isn't. I really believe that. If I didn't, I'd brain you with a rock."

"If he'd wanted to hit either one of us, he'd have done it. He's just warning me away."

"I'll buy that. Let's accommodate him by waving white handkerchiefs and running like hell back to the car."

He settled his back against the boulder. "Can't do that. I have to take him in."

"Then maybe you'd better present your side of the argument by firing back with that gun on your hip."

"He's in the trees above. Hand gun won't reach him."

"This may be an awkward question to answer, but since you knew he had a rifle, why in the hell didn't you bring one?"

"Hey, I didn't want to kill the man, just arrest him."

I looked out over the valley. "I want to thank you for providing this magnificent view before my imminent demise. It's really a joy to carry such beauty to my grave. I'll always remember you for that, Bubba."

"Yeah, it is nice." He kicked a small stone down the slope. "You know, I just might have made a mistake here. I was sure Porter wouldn't do any shooting, but come to think of it, his whole life was tied up in Ada, and now that she's dead, he may have stripped his gears."

I patted his shoulder. "Always liked a man big enough to admit his errors. You're really not too good at this sheriffing business, are you?"

"Hell, I wasn't even a good tackle when I played football." He peered around the rock again. "But I got you into this and I'll get you out. Here's what we do. We don't go together. You stay here. I'll go across the slope. Plenty of rocks for cover

and he sees me for only two or three seconds at a time. When I get halfway across, you take off down the hill to the car—"

I flipped a small stone down the slope. "Forget that plan, Bubba baby. He gets you and I'm left sitting here with nothing to look forward to but staring in my funeral. *This* is what we do. You go left and I go right and we break at the same time. He has to make a choice. One or the other will make it. From there we play it by ear."

"I dunno. If you get killed—"

"Don't worry about me. Sarah must have mentioned that, as a dyed-in-the-wool coward, I'm the world's fastest human when trouble comes. Unless Porter's been practicing shooting at blurs, he won't even come close. Take a deep breath. We go on three."

"Dammit. I said, stay here!"

"One."

"I'm the sheriff, Kevin! I'm in charge!"

"Ready or not—two."

"DAMMIT, KEVIN!"

"Three!"

I rolled up on my toes and took off like a sprinter leaving the blocks, angling slightly downhill to pick up momentum; diving and rolling behind a rock thirty feet away and driving hard for the next one.

The rifle cracked once, then again.

The second brought a sharp yell from Bubba just as I dived into the trees and spun on my stomach, looking out over the slope and gasping for air. Running hard at this altitude could be hazardous to your health.

Two-thirds of the way across, Bubba lay behind a large boulder, knotting his handkerchief around one calf, the tan pants leg already covered with blood.

He may have edged me out for the Dummy of the Month Award, but that was no reason to leave him bleeding out there. I had to get him to that four wheel drive and to the doctor.

I scanned the trees at the top of the clearing, cursing Porter under my breath. Maybe he deserved the award more than either of us.

First things first. I picked up a round rock about the size of a baseball, scrubbed off the dirt, and started up the slope toward where I thought he might be. Exactly what good a rock would be against a rifle escaped me, but any kind of weapon made me feel as though I had a chance.

As a city dweller I really had none. I wasn't too good at slipping from behind one of the sparse tree trunks to another, Indian style, and I must have made more noise than a pack of Cub Scouts on an outing.

"Turn around!"

The voice behind me was

very cold. So was the pit of my stomach. He could have simply shot me.

Jack Spratt, Bubba had said. It was a good description, but I doubted if Jack Spratt's face had ever held so much sorrow and grief. Or that he'd ever worn a green nylon jacket and pointed a gleaming rifle at someone's stomach.

"Who the hell are you?"

"Sarah's brother." It seemed like the right thing to say.

It was. He appeared to relax a little. "Nice woman, Sarah. Told Ada how to fix her hair so that she looked better."

I wasn't about to tell him that was a matter of opinion.

"Going to shoot me, Porter?"

"I sure am if you don't drop that rock."

My fingers opened as though they were spring-loaded.

"Listen," he said, "I don't want to hurt you. Didn't want to hurt Bubba, either."

"If you mean that, you'll help me get him to the doctor. Lucky you didn't kill him."

"Didn't try. Just wanted to slow him up. I knew he'd be after me because he thought I killed Ada." Tears glistened suddenly. "Didn't do it, but to get the bastard that did, I need a car. Bubba must have taken the keys to mine, so I'll have to use his. Give me your word you won't give me any trouble and

you can go down there and help him. Tell him I'll give myself up as soon as I kill Greeley."

The tears made me decide to gamble. "I can't do that, Porter. Try to walk away, and rifle or no rifle, I'll be all over you, so you better shoot me now and get it over with."

I thought I'd drawn a dead man's hand. The rifle came up an inch and the whites of his eyes showed.

"I'll do just that because I got nothing to lose. Bubba already has me hung up to dry for killing Ada. I knew that when I saw her lying there last night. No way to prove I didn't do it, so I got out of there. Only thing left is the satisfaction of killing Greeley."

I wet dry lips. "How do you know he did it?"

"I just know. Ada liked to talk sexy with the men. I told her that was dangerous. Most take it for what it is, which is just joking around, but there are some who don't play games when it comes to that sort of thing. When they get liquored up, they expect a woman to deliver and get real mean when she won't."

"Like Greeley Carstairs or Hanson Michaels."

He spat. "Greeley's my choice."

"Might be Michaels. You'd be making a big mistake, the same

mistake you say Bubba is making about you."

He stepped backward. "Now don't you get on me, trying to confuse me. I know what I know. And I know I gotta kill Greeley. You, too, if I have to."

Bubba was bleeding down there on the slope. Getting shot myself wouldn't help him at all. Wouldn't do too much for me, either. But I couldn't let Porter walk away so he could kill Greeley. I needed something that would make him change his mind.

"Porter, if I can prove you didn't kill Ada, you won't have to shoot Greeley because you know Bubba will take care of him. Right?"

"How the hell are you going to do that?"

I brushed away humus until I found soft dirt. "Step on this spot with your right foot and press down hard."

He stared at me. "What in the hell for?"

"Would Ada want you to spend the rest of your life in jail?"

His eyes narrowed as he thought it over. Warily, he stepped forward and gingerly pressed his foot down, his eyes fixed on me and his finger on the trigger as though he expected the ground to give way. If it did, he was taking a dead man with him.

The cleat pattern was differ-

ent and the heel was sharp.

I took a deep breath. "Porter, you don't have to kill anyone."

His voice was suspicious. "Why should I trust you?"

"Would Sarah's brother lie?"

There was magic in that name.

I don't know why you insist on leaving tomorrow, Bubba had said. Someone would think you weren't having a good time. But the least I can do is have you over for dinner, which I intended to do anyway. My sister is here for a few weeks and she's a very good cook, but no talk about fats or cholesterol or any of that stuff or you might hurt her feelings.

Just what I needed to finish off this fiasco. A sensitive cook.

The setting sun had painted the clouds a brilliant yellow above the mountain peaks when I walked up to his house. He was sprawled in a lawn chair, wearing shorts, his pillar-like bandaged leg stretched out before him. Porter had only nicked the calf, drawing a spectacular flow of blood but doing no permanent damage.

I stood over him. "I don't like to jump on an injured man, but I want you to know I don't appreciate being last to know."

He grinned. "Hey, I may not be quick, but I'm really not dumb. I saw you worrying about that semicircle in the gravel

and the bruises on her throat and I got the message. It looked like only a tall man could have clamped an arm around her neck from behind, spun her around so that her heels marked the gravel, and driven that knife straight in. But that didn't mean I could forget about Porter. While we went after him, I had my deputy check out Greeley and Hanson. Hanson's boot matched the footprint, the sleeve of his jacket showed scratches, and he claimed he lost his knife somewhere. Hell, even I didn't know until I found Hanson in a cell. Who told you?"

"Porter stopped by after you released him. He said you didn't even arrest him for shooting you."

"Aw, Porter has enough trouble with Ada dead. And I know damned well he could have killed me if he'd wanted to. He meant it when he said all he wanted was to slow me down while he went after Greeley. Damned good thing you talked him out of it. He'd have killed the wrong man."

"Very probably," I said. "I'll be expecting that cast, suitably bronzed, after the trial. A presentation ceremony isn't necessary. You can send it by U.P.S."

The silhouette of a woman appeared in the door. "Dinner is ready."

Bubba heaved himself to his feet and limped toward the

house. "Let's not get her mad. Throws pots, like her mother."

Fine. Not only sensitive, but quick-tempered. I should have checked out Sarah's freezer before accepting Bubba's invitation.

Whatever Bubba's sister was, she went first class. The table sparkled with white linen, crystal, and gleaming silverware, a pair of candles furnishing dancing highlights.

She came through the kitchen doorway carrying a silver tray. What it held, I had no idea. My brain had gone numb.

Long, dark hair, blue eyes, golden earrings, white blouse, dinner length black skirt. Presence, grace, sophistication, beauty.

This was the sensitive pot thrower?

"Hi, Kevin," she said. "I'm Loretta."

"Just graduated from Harvard Law School," said Bubba. "Has a job offer in New York, but I'm trying to talk her into Denver."

Clean, fresh air. Fishing. Long walks. Sitting on a mountain top. Ideal for a loner like you. Loner. That was the key word. You slipped it by me, Sarah, buried it so that I wouldn't know what you were up to.

I stumbled forward to help Loretta with the tray.

"Roast beef," she said.

I thought they were the most beautiful words I'd ever heard, and I really didn't care if she decided to settle in Tibet. I could hold my own herding yaks with anyone.

Of course, having Bubba as a brother-in-law would be pretty scary, but what the hell.

I forgave Sarah everything, even the broken nose.

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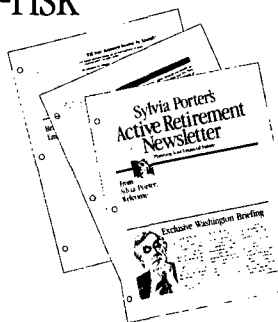
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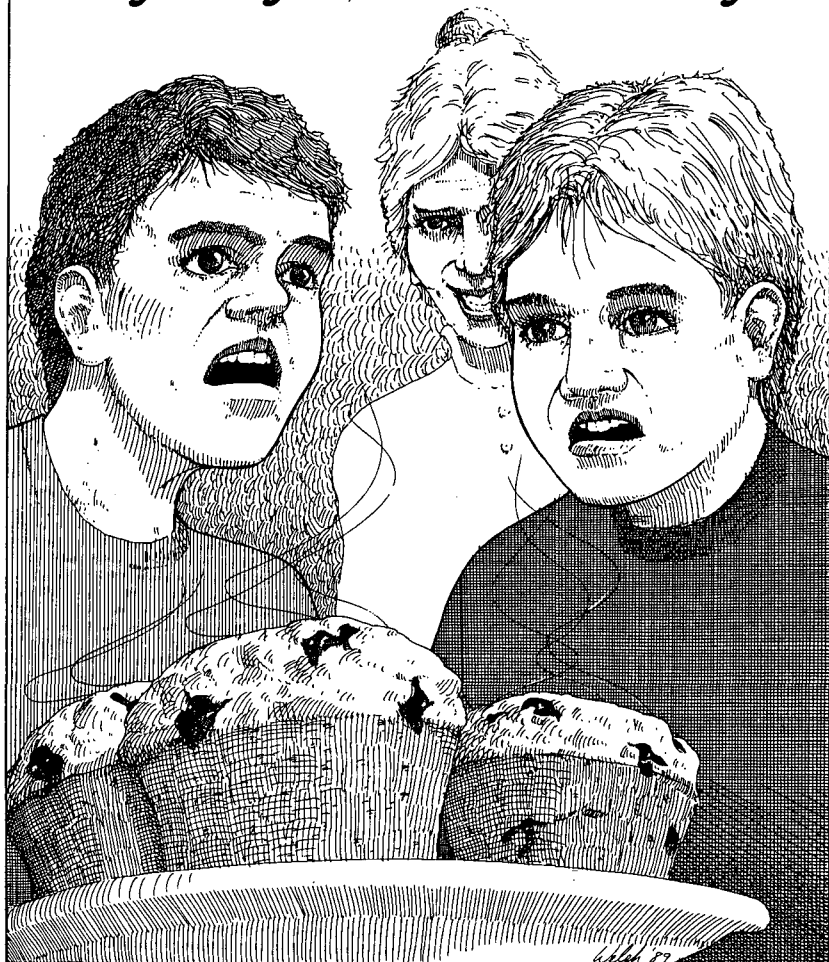


Sylvia Porter's
**Active Retirement
Newsletter**

FICTION

Computer Error

by Taylor McCafferty



Sixteen-year-old Roger Schackelford was a straight A student, a member of the National Honor Society, and captain of the computer team.

He was also a thief. Not a thief in the conventional sense, and certainly not a thief in his own eyes, but a thief nevertheless.

Sixty-five-year-old Samuel Westbrook was an avid gardener, a purchasing manager, and a recent retiree.

He was also a petty dictator. Not a dictator in the conventional sense, and certainly not a dictator in his own eyes, but a dictator nevertheless.

What Sam Westbrook really would've liked was a small Latin American country that he could call his very own. For a while, he'd been satisfied terrorizing those who reported to him at the contracting firm where he'd worked. He would walk, unsmiling, around his subordinates' desks, happy in the knowledge that the approach of his short, stocky form made grown men want to cry. Unfortunately, after retirement, there was no one left to terrorize but his wife.

Although Roger the thief and Westbrook the dictator had lived next door to each other all of Roger's sixteen years, they had almost never spoken. Unless you counted Westbrook's bellowing at Roger to get off his lawn, or to turn down that blasted stereo. In that case, they had spoken (although somewhat one-sidedly) about once or twice a month.

On the other hand, Roger spoke to Mrs. Westbrook a lot more frequently. In fact, before Sam Westbrook retired, Roger had spoken to her almost every school day. In the afternoons, when his mother was still at work, Roger would often stop by on his way home to tell Mrs. Westbrook about the computer programs he was writing, and how well the team had done that day. Mrs. Westbrook always seemed happy for the company, nodding her gray head attentively, oohing and ahing over every word.

And every morning, when Roger passed by on his way to catch the school bus, Mrs. Westbrook would always be outside, sweeping the porch, or weeding her morning glories. She always lifted her thin hand in greeting, and occasionally, she'd run back inside to get Roger a blueberry muffin fresh from the oven. "Now, you have a good day," she'd say, her blue eyes twinkling at him.

Westbrook's retirement, however, did away with the blueberry muffins and the afternoon chats, once and for all. Suddenly, Roger never saw Mrs. Westbrook out in her yard any more. Roger was

a little surprised to discover how much he missed Mrs. Westbrook and her cheery smile.

Although he never actually saw her any more, occasionally Roger still heard Mrs. Westbrook. Her voice was always like a kitten mewling, almost completely drowned out by Westbrook's booming barks. "Emmaline, I can't believe you didn't buy the store brand. I CAN'T BELIEVE IT! Do you have any idea how much more this name brand costs? Are you out of your mind?"

You could hear every single word out in the street. You couldn't always hear Mrs. Westbrook's reply. If there was one. Every morning now Roger walked as fast as he could past the Westbrook house so he didn't have to listen to the morning—and afternoon—tirades. But, no matter how fast he walked, he always caught a few words.

"I don't care if Hensley's store was having a sale! You are never to buy anything again without my permission. Is that clear?"

Some days, it was just orders being bellowed. "Emmaline! Emmaline! Get me the newspaper. NOW!"

"That old man is a first class jerk," Roger told his mother more than once.

"Now, dear," she always replied. "Mr. Westbrook is probably just having a little trouble adjusting to being retired. He probably misses being in charge at work. After all, he *was* in management." Apparently his mother would've thought Hitler was just misunderstood.

"Phooey. Mr. Westbrook is still a jerk." Roger had said it so many times that when he and his best friend Gilbert Watts began doing Westbrook's yard work every Friday, his mother was amazed. She knew very well that Roger hated Westbrook. Also, she couldn't get Roger to leave his computer games long enough to so much as take out the garbage, let alone trim and mow and weed, like Roger was doing next door.

"How much is Mr. Westbrook paying you boys?" Roger's mother asked him as soon as he returned home, hot and sweaty, that first Friday night.

Roger's reply was immediate, but vague. "Not enough." His dark head disappeared into the bathroom, and the sound of the shower cut off any further discussion.

What Roger neglected to mention—intentionally—to his mother was that Westbrook was not paying him or Gilbert one red cent. Roger and Gilbert, in fact, had agreed to do Westbrook's work every week for nothing.

Gilbert had a word for this agreement. "Blackmail!" He also had several other words that he practically spat in Roger's direction the following Monday at school. "Extortion! White slavery! That's what it is!" Gilbert's face was almost as red as his hair.

Roger agreed with the first two words. White slavery seemed to be carrying it a bit far.

"And it's all your fault!"

Although Gilbert was about six inches shorter, he outweighed Roger by almost fifty pounds. Roger took a step backward. "Now look, Gilbert," he said, "you wanted to form the club as much as I did."

"It was your idea!" Gilbert did have a point here. The Buccaneer User's Group had been Roger's brainchild. At the time—four weeks before—it had seemed to be the answer to a prayer. Particularly if the prayer happened to be, "Please, God, send me more computer games."

Roger and Gilbert had been repeating this prayer ever since they'd received computers for Christmas the year before. For an entire year, they'd been spending every penny of their allowances on computer games. Games like "Space Chase," in which you raced through galaxy after galaxy shooting aliens. Or "Swamp Fever," in which you raced through swamp after swamp shooting giant mosquitos. Or, their favorite, "Monsters and Meteors," in which you raced through space shooting monsters—while the monsters tossed meteors at your spaceship. If you killed all the monsters before the monsters killed you, you saved the world.

Roger and Gilbert had saved the world a total of one hundred sixty-seven times, but they still weren't satisfied. They needed new worlds to save—new worlds to conquer—but at a minimum cost of twenty-five dollars per game, the boys had soon discovered their allowances just didn't stretch far enough. So they had both started trying to figure out ways to copy the games they already had. So they could sell them at half price to their friends, and buy—you guessed it—more games for themselves.

It had taken a while, because the manufacturers of these games had programmed special defense systems into them so that copying them would be impossible. But Roger and Gilbert had finally done it. The first time they succeeded in copying "Space Chase" onto another disk, they'd both been wild with excitement. "We've done it, we've done it!" Roger had yelled, dancing around the room.

Gilbert had laughed and clapped him on the back. But then, a

few weeks later, after they'd copied—and sold—quite a few more games, Gilbert had commented to Roger, "I don't know. Isn't this the same as stealing, Roger? I mean, the people who make these games would be plenty mad if they found out. Maybe we shouldn't be doing this."

Roger had glared at him. "Are you kidding? If the people who made these games hadn't wanted us to copy them, then they should've made it harder to do. That's all. It's *their* fault, not ours." Gilbert still wasn't convinced, but Roger went right on as if Gilbert hadn't even spoken. He'd been thinking about forming a club for over a week now, and he had it all figured out. "I've even got a name for the club," he said. "The Buccaneer User's Group. B.U.G.! It'll be great!"

Roger hurried to explain, because Gilbert was already looking skeptical. The Buccaneer User's Group was to be a club of pirates. Computer pirates, that is, just like Roger and Gilbert, who'd figured out ways to copy computer games.

"That would be the only requirement for membership," Roger said, his eyes dancing. "In order to join B.U.G., you have to have broken a computer game—one we don't already have—and you have to give us a copy of it."

Gilbert was even more skeptical now. "Why would anyone do that? Just hand over a computer game?"

"Because we'll trade them. Game for game. That way we'll end up with tons of games!" Roger paused here, and added, as if he'd just thought of it, "You know, we could make our own copies of the new members' copies, and then sell *them*. We could make a *lot* of money."

Gilbert's eyes widened. "But, Roger," he said, "the more people we tell what we're doing, the more chance we have of getting caught."

"Nonsense," Roger said. "The only people who'll know what we're doing would be members of B.U.G.—or somebody who's bought one of our games. They'll be just as guilty as we are. Nobody's going to rat on *themselves*!"

Gilbert was still looking hesitant, but Roger was prepared for this. "If it will make you feel any better," he added, "we could use code names. And a post office box for them to send games to. I could call myself Jolly Roger. What do you think?"

There was a long silence. "Look, what can happen?" Roger wheedled. "We can always just close up shop. Anytime."

Gilbert sighed, looked away, and then finally said, "Call me Captain Kidd." Roger laughed out loud.

The next day at school the boys put out the word to everybody they knew about this club they'd heard about—the Buccaneer User's Group, run by a couple of pirates named Jolly Roger and Captain Kidd.

The word spread fast. Within a week Jolly Roger and Captain Kidd had received nine computer disks—each disk had at least one pirated game, some had several.

The week after that, the total disks received had gone up to twenty-five, the week after that to thirty-seven. That week a computer wizard from a school in another district wrote B.U.G. offering to show them—in exchange for ten computer games—how to break into the computerized credit system of Hensley's department store. "I can give you an unlimited credit line at Hensley's if you want it," he wrote. Hensley's was a local department store where practically everybody in town shopped. Family-owned and -operated, the store had only just recently begun using computers to do its accounting. Jolly Roger had whistled when he read the letter. Captain Kidd had turned pale. "You're not taking him up on it, are you?" he'd asked.

"Of course not," Roger had said, not quite meeting Gilbert's eyes, "but it sure is tempting, isn't it?"

The following afternoon, however, temptation wasn't the only thing they had to worry about. That afternoon Sam Westbrook found out about B.U.G. How it happened was so easy it was scary.

Roger was walking home from school, not watching where he was going, reading the label of one of the computer disks that had just arrived that day. Gilbert was walking right beside Roger, also not watching where he was going because he too was reading a label on yet another disk fresh from the post office box. That Friday the box had been almost full, so Gilbert and Roger planned to spend the afternoon at Roger's house playing their new games.

Both boys were so intent on reading what they held in their hands that neither of them noticed Sam Westbrook. He was standing in the street, inches from the curb, watering his lawn. When he was watering his lawn, Westbrook felt that if cars had to go around him that was their problem.

Unfortunately, it became Roger's problem. His eyes on the computer disk, Roger walked smack into Westbrook. And then, Gilbert walked into both of them. In the collision, both Gilbert and Roger

dropped the disks they were carrying and the accompanying letters, which Westbrook picked up. And read.

Roger and Gilbert both made a grab for the letters *and* the disks, but it was too late. Westbrook, even at sixty-five, still had pretty good eyes; and he began reading as soon as his hand touched the first letter. Apparently, he could read quite fast. He began to smile almost immediately. Not an attractive smile.

"Well, boys, it seems you two have been up to no good."

Roger grabbed the disks and letters from Westbrook's hand, and tried to bluff. "So?" he said.

"So, if you want me to keep my mouth shut about what I just found out about your little club of BUG's, you two will be doing a little work for me. Starting this afternoon." And Westbrook handed Roger the hose, and walked inside. "Call it pest control," he said over his shoulder. He snickered at his little joke.

For the next two back-breaking weeks Roger and Gilbert didn't have much time to play computer games. They raked all the leaves out of Westbrook's yard, bagged them for pickup, weeded his flower garden, weeded the morning glories, cleaned out the gutters, and washed all the storm windows.

While they were cleaning the storm windows, Roger finally saw Mrs. Westbrook again. But it was not the Mrs. Westbrook he remembered. Gone was the cheery smile. Now there were lines etched between her eyebrows he'd never noticed before. She pushed past him in the kitchen, carrying a feather duster, and went out the door without speaking.

The following Friday Westbrook had them clean out his garage. His gray hair standing out at odd angles around his head, his shirt unevenly buttoned, the old man had trembled with rage while he pointed out streaks on the window panes that Roger had just cleaned. "I will not have my employees do such sloppy work!" His voice sounded as if he were on the verge of tears. "I WILL NOT HAVE IT!"

Roger hurried to redo the windows. Later, while they loaded old magazines into a large plastic bag, Gilbert told Roger what he already knew, "That old geezer is a nut."

Roger nodded, his mind working. "We've got to get out of this mess."

Gilbert's lower lip trembled. "Don't you think he knows we want out? He'll never let us off the hook. Never!"

Roger didn't answer.

After they'd finished with the magazines, Westbrook had them polish the wooden case that held his gun collection. While they worked, he stood behind them, watching. Finally, he reached past Gilbert and took out one of the guns. "See this one?" Westbrook suddenly said. Both boys jumped when he spoke. Westbrook seemed not to notice. He smiled wide enough to show decaying back teeth and handed Gilbert a small handgun with an ivory handle. "This one's a real beauty, isn't it? This little thing could hurt a man real bad." He paused then, and added, "Or a boy."

"Very nice," Gilbert said stiffly, handing the gun back as if it were a dead thing. Roger's eyes had gotten very big.

Later, when they were walking home, Gilbert asked, "Do you think that old man was threatening us?"

Roger shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, but I think it's time we fight fire with fire."

That night he and Gilbert made a phone call and the following Saturday they met to put Roger's plan into motion. They met, of course, in Roger's living room, in front of the computer. Gilbert began typing; a few minutes later, just as promised, they connected with the computer that did the billing for Hensley's department store.

Roger whistled. "Well," he said, "it may have cost us ten computer games, but this is worth it."

Gilbert then called up Westbrook's bill. No surprise. It said the Westbrooks owed absolutely nothing. "He wouldn't," Gilbert said. Then he typed in a balance owing of one thousand dollars. Roger leaned over and added something else—he made it a hundred and twenty days past due.

"Now," Roger said, smiling a smile almost as unattractive as Sam Westbrook's, "we've got something to bargain with."

Gilbert grinned back at him. "Just wait until that old geezer gets his bill. He'll scream bloody murder to the store about this mistake, but every time the store removes it from his account, we'll add it back on. We'll have his bill so messed up, they'll be dunning him for years."

Roger nodded. "And, maybe, Westbrook will want to take us up on our offer. We'll leave him alone if he leaves us alone."

Satisfied, they turned off the computer.

Westbrook's billing date was the tenth of the month. Allowing for processing and mailing time, Roger and Gilbert figured his bill would arrive on the fifteenth. That was a Thursday. They figured

that they would approach him with their ultimatum that night.

They figured wrong.

Westbrook's bill arrived on the fourteenth. Roger and Gilbert were in Roger's living room that night, studying the Periodic Table for a chemistry test the next day. That's when they heard the commotion. It sounded like thunder in the distance.

They looked at each other, and realized at the same instant what that thunder was. Westbrook. Screaming.

"You don't suppose—?" Gilbert didn't finish his sentence. He and Roger raced for the door.

They were just crossing into Westbrook's front yard when they heard the first shot. "Omigod, omigod, omigod." That was all Gilbert could seem to say. He was doing better than Roger, however. Roger couldn't make a sound.

Particularly when they got to the front door of the Westbrook house. The door was standing ajar, so both boys could plainly see poor Mrs. Westbrook cowering in a corner of the living room. She was crouched, shaking, behind one of the floor lamps. The lamp offered no protection whatsoever. As was evidenced by the hole in the plaster right behind her left ear.

Across the room from the whimpering Mrs. Westbrook, Sam Westbrook was waving around the ivory-handled gun he'd shown the boys earlier. At least, that was what he held in his right hand. In his left hand was the monthly statement from Hensley's department store.

He whirled around when he saw the boys come in. "Don't try to stop me," Westbrook said, his eyes wild. "She's evil. EVIL! She's trying to bankrupt me!"

"No! It's a mistake!" Roger yelled, making a grab for the gun. "It's all a mistake!" After that, everything seemed to happen in slow motion. Westbrook wrenched away, taking aim. Roger turned, and saw poor Mrs. Westbrook, her frightened eyes fixed on his face.

This time Westbrook didn't miss. The gun sounded like an explosion in the small room. Mrs. Westbrook moaned and went down, clutching her arm. Bright red appeared on her sleeve. Roger yelled, "NO-O-O-O! It's a mistake, I tell you!"

Both boys tackled Westbrook, hitting him at the same time. But there really was no need. After the gun fired, the old man seemed to go limp. When the boys hit him, he seemed almost distracted. He just lay there on the floor, unmoving, staring at the ceiling. "I had to do it," he said. "I had to."

The police took Westbrook away, the ambulance took his wife away, and Roger and Gilbert both talked to the police and their parents for a very long time. About how weird Sam Westbrook had been acting lately. They said nothing about Hensley's department store or the Buccaneer User's Group.

That night, after the excitement died down, Roger—with trembling fingers—removed all traces of their tampering with Hensley's billing system. The following Monday they closed their post office box and told everyone they knew that B.U.G. had gone out of business.

During the trial Hensley's accounting manager testified, "I have no idea how the mistake on the Westbrook invoice could've been made. Computer error, I suppose."

During the trial the police also testified as to what Sam Westbrook had said minutes after they arrived. He had told the police that he was very sorry he'd shot his wife in the arm. He'd been aiming for her heart.

That little comment got him ten years in prison. It also got Mrs. Westbrook a divorce, the house, and their savings. Unfortunately, there wasn't much left after Westbrook's legal expenses.

Soon after the trial was over, a very contrite Roger and Gilbert appeared on Mrs. Westbrook's doorstep. When Mrs. Westbrook opened the door, her face lit up.

"Well, boys," she said, smiling at them both, "you are just the people I've been wanting to see. I'm making some blueberry muffins. You're just in time."

The house did smell wonderful. Roger sniffed appreciatively, and moved into the living room. There Gilbert looked over at Roger. They had agreed that Roger would do the talking. "Well, we've come over to tell you that we want to keep on doing your yard work and stuff." Roger paused, and added, "For free."

Mrs. Westbrook stopped still for a moment, and just looked at him. "Oh?" she said.

"We want to help out. Since you're alone now and all."

Roger glanced over at Gilbert. Gilbert smiled back at him. It was what they'd both decided. "We owe her," Roger had said. "If it weren't for us, she wouldn't have gotten hurt."

Now Emmaline Westbrook folded her thin arms across her chest and smiled her sweet smile. "Well, boys, I don't think I can agree to that."

"It's the least we can do—" Roger began.

"That's right," Mrs. Westbrook said, "and it's not enough." Her blue eyes twinkled frostily.

Roger's head jerked up. "Not—not enough?"

Mrs. Westbrook nodded her gray head. "Actually, boys, I've been doing some thinking. I had a long time to think while I was in the hospital, recovering. I've been thinking about the day I was shot—and what you said, Roger."

Roger repeated dumbly, "What *I* said?"

"About the bill being a mistake. How did you know it was a mistake, Roger? How did *you* know I didn't actually charge that much?"

"Well, well—uh—" Roger was actually stammering. Gilbert glared at him.

Mrs. Westbrook nodded again, satisfied. "Really, boys, I *was* almost killed, you know." She sounded mildly scolding. "Now, what *I've* decided is that I want you two to help me with my shopping."

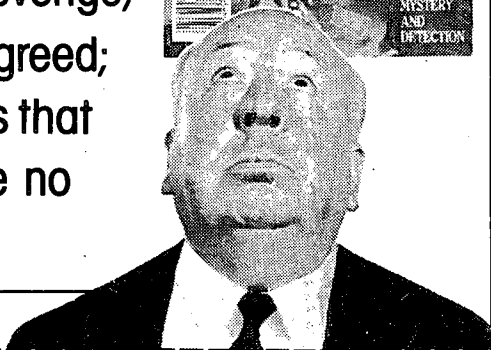
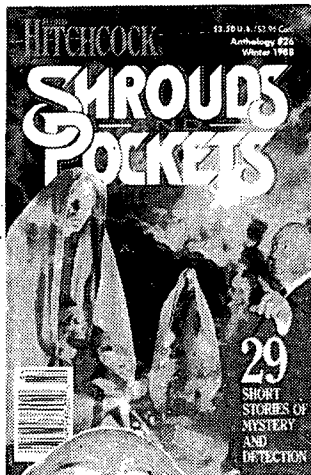
Gilbert looked relieved. "Like carry your bags, and—?"

Mrs. Westbrook interrupted. "No," she said. "Like giving me a new credit line at Hensley's. A nice fat one. And then, when I've done a little shopping, I want you to erase my balance." Her voice became harder, more metallic. "*Just like you did before.*"

A buzzer sounded from the kitchen. "Oh, good," Mrs. Westbrook said, cheerily. She was gone just a minute, returning with a plate full of warm muffins. She didn't, however, look at all surprised when neither boy had any appetite for them.

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HZNC2

FICTION

August Body

by Bill Crenshaw



There were six apartment buildings that Lieutenant Haggarty could see, six flat-roofed rectangular slabs of red brick rippling heat like they'd just left the kiln.

"There," said Haggarty, pointing to the only tree edging the parking lot. The parking places in its shade were occupied.

"We'll block somebody in," said Sergeant Lee.

"So we'll write ourselves a ticket."

Lee squeezed as much of the car into the shade as he could. Across the parking lot a blue and white unit sat running, windows up. "See," Haggarty said, opening his door, "it's only in unmarked cars the air con-

ditioners don't work." His door banged into the bumper of a Toyota.

"Hey!" somebody yelled. "That's my car, chump."

Haggarty peeled himself off the vinyl seat and forced his way through the narrow gap between car door and frame. He flashed his shield at the irate owner lumbering his way. He was not in the mood for public relations work.

He put on his coat and made a half-hearted effort to straighten his tie, taking his time in the thin shade. On the other side of the tree a little poodle with blue toenails and blue collar was yap-yap-yapping at a black and white cat stretched on a branch out of its reach, unconcerned. The dog stopped yapping long enough to trot over and sniff Haggarty's leg, growling. Haggarty resisted the urge to boot it into whichever apartment building was in range.

The buildings were two-storied brick boxes from the early fifties, ugly and thoughtless and solid, four apartments to each building, two bedrooms each apartment, no soul, good walls, lousy plumbing. No doubt about which building. A group was already forming in front of the screen door of the building on the right. Already, in spite of the heat.

It was the kind of heat that made you think fillings were going to melt right out of your teeth, and Haggarty was glad to edge through the crowd and move out of the sun, out of the glare, away from the heat mirages dancing off asphalt and car hoods, glad to move into the dim cool of the corridor, glad to be inside in spite of what he knew they'd find behind the closed door and the uniformed policeman, what they'd find in the apartment.

In the apartment the dead girl lay on the living room rug in a red-brown stain, staring at the ceiling with dull eyes. The clothes left on her were ripped. Lee crossed the room to the big air conditioner and opened his coat. Haggarty shivered, at the coolness of the room, he thought, rather than the girl. "I hate these," he said.

"Yeah," said Lee.

Haggarty didn't know the uniform on the door, but the one inside was Booker.

"Forensics?" asked Haggarty.

"On their way," said Booker.

"Okay," said Haggarty. "Who found her?"

"I found her." A voice from behind him. It sounded defiant. Haggarty turned. Through strings of brightly colored plastic beads that served as a door he saw two men sitting at the

kitchen table in front of a couple of cans of beer. Haggarty didn't know which one had spoken, but he bet with himself that it was the one on the left, the stocky one with the beard and the hair just a tad beyond stylish, just a tad into high-rise pickup trucks and rebel flag license plates, an upscale good-old-boy. Haggarty felt a headache start.

"Who?" he said.

"Me," said the beard. "I found her." The one on the right sat pale and silent in his T-shirt, skinny and curved with the hard, wiry muscles of manual labor.

"You the husband?" Haggarty heard himself say, not meaning to phrase it that way, "the" husband like "the" dog or "the" cat. The beard stiffened a little, taking offense, maybe.

"I'm the boyfriend," he said.

The boyfriend had a couple of Band-aids above his right eye and what looked like blood on his shirt. Haggarty felt himself frown. "Is this your apartment?"

The beard tried to speak, cleared his throat. "'Becca's," he said.

"You living together?"

"None of your business," said the beard, leaning forward.

The last thing Haggarty wanted to deal with was angry boyfriends trying to protect the

reputations of dead lovers, if that was in fact what the beard was doing. And who was this with him, and what were they doing sitting around on the scene? "Booker," he said, not turning around. "What the hell's going on here?"

Booker was at his side, fumbling for his notebook. "This is Mr. Ruder, Calvin Wade, boyfriend, and Mr. Morton, Donald P., neighbor. Mr. Ruder arrived at apartment about 1300 and found the deceased. He ran upstairs to Mr. Morton's apartment and . . ."

"What are they doing *here*?" Haggarty interrupted. The boyfriend, Ruder, was squeezing his beer can too hard, making it crinkle. Morton was looking confused. Haggarty felt Lee's presence in the doorway.

"I got every right . . ." Ruder began, rising. Lee was suddenly beside Ruder's ear, telling him quietly to sit back down.

Booker was saying something. "... showed me down. When he saw the body again, he started to faint, so Morton and me helped him into the kitchen so he could sit down and . . ."

Haggarty couldn't imagine Ruder starting to faint. He turned to face Booker. "This scene is not secured. You have bystanders sitting in the vic-

tim's kitchen drinking beer like this was a little afternoon party. You know better than this, Booker. Get them out of here." He nodded toward Morton. "Get them to his apartment. Tell them to wait."

"Yessir," said Booker.

Ruder picked up his can.

"Leave it," said Haggarty.

Ruder drained it before banging it down. Haggarty ignored the challenge.

When they were gone, Lee cleared his throat. "A little rough there, weren't you, lieutenant?"

Lee got formal only when he disapproved. Haggarty looked around the kitchen and shook his head. "I hate these." He went back to the living room.

The girl had been stabbed eight or nine times that he could see, long-bladed kitchen knife beside her, wiped clean of blood, and probably of prints. She'd been strangled, too, and slapped around, from the look of the bruises on her throat and face. The blood around her was thick and dried. She'd been there a while. Her blouse had been torn off her. Her trousers were ripped at the front, but still mostly on.

"Where the hell's forensics?" Haggarty growled.

"Here the hell's forensics," said Marks as he and Kenneth entered the room with crime

kits and cameras. "What's eating you?" Haggarty said nothing. Marks looked to Lee. Lee shrugged. "Long day," he said.

Marks cocked his head to get a better look at the body. "If you'll just go somewhere, Haggarty, we can do our jobs."

"Get Booker," said Haggarty to Lee, pushing through the beads into the kitchen.

"Don't you just love police work?" Marks muttered as Lee edged past him to call Booker back down.

Booker came in and Haggarty asked him for a report. He poked through the kitchen cabinets while Booker gave him what he had. The boyfriend had come by to pick up the girlfriend . . .

"Girl have a name?" said Haggarty stretching to see a high shelf. He wasn't touching except with his eyes, opening cabinets with fingernails under the edge of the doors instead of using the knobs. The shelves were neat, were more than neat, were precise, dishes and glasses and cans and jars ranked and filed for inspection. Ordered. Meticulous. Obsessive?

"Watkins, Rebecca M.," said Booker, voice official and a bit nervous. "White female, age thirty-seven, date of birth . . ."

"Thirty-seven?" She'd looked younger there on the floor. Actually, he realized, he hadn't

looked at her face. "Go on."

Booker leaned over his notebook. "Boyfriend came by about one o'clock, knocked, got no answer, let himself in with his key, figuring she was in the shower. Found her on floor. Didn't touch anything. Started yelling, he thinks, Morton agrees. Morton came out of his apartment, using kitchen door at top of stairs. He yelled down. Ruder heard him, ran out of apartment and upstairs calling for help. Tripped on Morton's dog on the stairs and cut his head pretty good. Said his girlfriend was hurt. Morton sat him in his kitchen so his wife could doctor his head and went downstairs, saw the girl, locked the apartment, called the police."

Booker stopped and looked up.

"You got the times?" asked Haggarty.

Booker looked back down. "Call came in at 1302, put out same to EMS and police. We were a few blocks over, so we got here quick, 1307. Cancelled EMS 1309, forensics and homicide requested same. Homicide arrived 1316." He looked up. "I didn't get forensics' arrival."

Haggarty looked at his watch. "Call it 1:23 or 1323, if you prefer." The little joke was Haggarty's way of apologizing for jumping him so hard before. If

Booker got it, he didn't show it.

"Anything else?" Haggarty said.

"Yessir. There's a window opened in the streetside bedroom, screen cut and pulled back. Looks like a B&E gone bad."

"Show me."

The window was raised fifteen or sixteen inches, not quite as high as the top of the hedge between the building and the street. Haggarty sighed. They let the hedge grow for privacy, no doubt. She got more privacy than she wanted.

"Let's go see the boyfriend," he said.

The corridor seemed hot and damp after the cool of the apartment. In the glare beyond the screen door the group was growing larger, talking quietly. An occasional laugh rose with cigarette smoke in the still air.

"Every call I wonder where the hell they come from," muttered Lee.

"They smell it out," said Booker. "Vultures."

"Don't insult vultures," said Lee.

The poodle shot yapping past them and scratched at the door to the left at the top of the stairs. Booker gave the door a sharp rap and pushed it open, and the heat washed out into Haggarty's face, heat and all the smells that heat sucked out

of dog beds and garbage pails and the morning dishes sitting in sinks of filmy water. Above the kitchen table a ceiling fan wobbled, stirring the hot air like a spoon stirs coffee, its on/off chain twitching and clinking on the light fixture beneath it. At the table Ruder and Morton each held a fist around another sweating can of beer and glared up at them, hostile.

They made Haggarty mad just to look at them. They both looked like trouble, the kind of macho types who wouldn't mind knocking a woman around if she gave a little lip, didn't know her place. He didn't like them. *Not being fair*, he told himself. There was no reason to dislike them. He was tired, maybe. Maybe it was the headache. Maybe it was the heat. He was on a short fuse, he knew, and he should let Lee do the questioning. He fanned away a fly. "Mister . . ."

"Ruder," prompted Booker.

"Ruder. Why don't you tell me what happened."

Ruder gestured at Booker with his beer can. "I already told him." The can was shaking.

Patience, Haggarty told himself. *He's had too many, seen too much.* "We need to go through it again, if you don't mind."

Ruder pushed his hands into his eyes and rubbed hard. "I

just lost my woman, man. I just lost my girl. I don't want to talk about it."

His voice was whiny. It grated. Haggarty tried not to show anger, tried to bite back what he wanted to say.

Lee stepped in with the textbook lines, calm and calming, sorry for your loss, Mr. Ruder, understand your pain, know it's hard, quicker we start, quicker we catch, appreciate cooperation in this your hour of grief.

Ruder drained his beer and opened another and started his story.

It was essentially the story Haggarty had heard from Booker. Ruder had found her when he came to pick her up. He had called for help. He had run up to Morton's apartment and tripped on the stairs, cut his head and scratched his face and knees and the palms of his hands. "I dint even know I was hurt," he said. "I dint feel nothing."

The more Ruder talked, the less Haggarty liked him. Ruder was playing the victim with Lee, self-pitying and self-serving, sounding like he was trying to tell *his* side, as if Lee had heard another side somewhere. He took frequent pulls at the beer. He looked shaken, but more with nervousness than shock, Haggarty thought, more shaken by what might come

than by what had happened, trying to control fear rather than grief. And he said "dint" for "didn't," which was like fingernails on chalkboards.

Ruder had last seen Rebecca alive, he said, when he left her apartment at about half past twelve that morning. They'd been out, had come back about eleven thirty, quarter to twelve. They'd seen Morton in the yard in his bathrobe looking for his dog or something. They went into the apartment, had a midnight snack, talked about the wrestling, and he left. He had seen Morton on his way out, he said, at the top of the stairs with his little dog.

"Wrestling?" asked Haggarty.

Ruder turned his face from Lee and looked at Haggarty as if he was someone who had just walked in. "Yeah. Tag team down at the Civic Center. Carolina Crushers against the Tornado Twins. Combat rules."

"Oh," said Haggarty. "Ras-slin'."

Ruder flushed and opened and closed his hands. The only sounds for a long moment were the click of the chain against the light and the buzz of a fat August fly.

"So why didn't you sleep over?" asked Haggarty.

Ruder flushed again. "None of your business," he said in a

tone forced smooth by his teeth.

"It's all my business," said Haggarty.

Ruder turned to Lee. "This guy . . . what's his problem? He get his jollies this way? This is my girl he's talking about."

"She's dead," said Haggarty. "She's my girl now."

Ruder erupted from his chair. "I don't have to put up with any of this crap." Lee put his fingertips on Ruder's chest and sat him back down, talking quietly. Haggarty stood statue still, leaning against the counter, looking, he hoped, unconcerned. Lee came over and stood beside him, back to the table.

"Okay?" he asked quietly.

Haggarty addressed Ruder. "What time did you say you got back from the match?"

Ruder looked from Haggarty to Lee and back to Haggarty. "Eleven thirty," he said finally, shrugging. "Quarter to twelve."

"And you left . . ."

"Forty-five minutes later, something like that."

Haggarty turned to Morton. "And you saw him both times?"

Morton cleared his throat and nodded.

"Quite a coincidence?"

"Quite a dog," said Morton. "Let the dumb little mutt out after the late news to do her nightlies, and she runs all around the yard to find just the right spot. I saw Rebecca and

Mr. Ruder here while I was waiting on her. Then later she wakes me up barking like crazy, so I get up to let her out again because I don't want another nightly in the house, but then I see Mr. Ruder saying good-night and figure that's what got the mutt barking."

"Hardly a mutt," said Haggarty.

"Wife's dog," said Morton, "if you can call that thing a dog."

"Did Ruder see you?"

"Yeah. Couldn't hardly help it with the mutt barking at him. I had her by the collar. He waved."

"And this was about what time?"

"I don't know. Pretty sure it was after twelve thirty."

"So you saw Rebecca Watkins when Ruder was leaving."

"Yes. Well, not if you mean *saw*. I mean I only *saw* Mr. Ruder. I didn't go downstairs. He was standing in the door, talking to her. She was back in the apartment."

"But you heard her."

"Sure, I heard her."

"What did she say?"

"Well, she said good night, I guess."

"You guess?"

"What else would she say?"

Haggarty's patience had dried up in the heat. "I mean *hear* like I meant *saw*. Did you *hear* her?"

"I don't know," said Morton, waving his hand as if he were shoing worrisome thoughts away like flies. "I thought I did. Maybe I didn't. I think I did."

"But maybe you didn't."

Ruder banged his fist down. "What is this? What the hell is this? Who is this guy anyway? Are you even a cop? Let me see some I.D. here, Mr. Cop. You can't ask this kind of crap. We don't even have lawyers here or anything."

Haggarty pulled out his shield and passed it to Lee. Ruder made a show of writing down the name and number, fingers white around the pen. Haggarty thought that Ruder must be on a short fuse, too, that maybe Ruder was always on a short fuse, that maybe it should be a short leash. Maybe he should find out how short. Haggarty asked Ruder if Rebecca were still in the clothes she had worn last night.

Ruder frowned. "I dint look downstairs," he said. "I dint see." The whine was back.

"What is she wearing, Booker?" said Haggarty, without turning around.

Booker looked in his notebook. "Black trousers, cotton, torn, partially removed. Apparently wearing red silk blouse at time of attack, removed by force. Wearing one black low heel shoe."

"Is that what she was wearing last night?" Haggarty asked.

Ruder nodded.

"That's what I saw her in," said Morton. "When they got back last night, I mean."

"And after you came in," said Haggarty to Ruder, "she got you a snack?"

"Yeah, wine and cheese for her. A beer for me. And potato chips."

"And did she clean up before you left? Wash the glasses, I mean, put them away, all that?"

"I don't know. I guess."

"I don't want a guess, Ruder," Haggarty snapped. Lee's head jerked around. "I want to know. Did she clean up, or not?"

"I said I don't know."

Lee turned back to Ruder. "Settle down," he said.

"Somebody got into that apartment pretty damn soon after you left," said Haggarty, his tone accusing. "She didn't even have time to change clothes for bed. Yet you didn't hear anything? See anything? If she cleaned up for a while after you left, he must have been just outside. If she cleaned up before you left, he might have already been inside the apartment." Haggarty's eyes flicked to Morton. "Or at least inside the building."

It took a second to sink in, a second before Morton's eyes started widening and his head started shaking back and forth.

"No, sir," he said, "no, sir, not me. No, sir."

Haggarty looked back to Ruder. He could see Ruder sweating, could feel his own. The heat was turning itself up. "Maybe he saw her last night when you said goodbye. Maybe he went down right after you left, thinking to have a little fun. Wife asleep, right? He's out chasing her damn mutt, he could say. Rebecca's just finishing up in the kitchen when he tries the door and finds it unlocked and slips in. He makes his move, drops his line, hey, baby. She tells him to buzz off. She slaps him. He gets mad. Things get out of hand."

While Haggarty was speaking, Morton's head shook back and forth harder and harder, and he kept saying "no, sir," louder and louder until both he and Haggarty were shouting to be heard and Booker had moved over to stand beside Morton just in case.

"NO, SIR!" Morton yelled, but Haggarty had already stopped. "No, sir," he said one last time.

Haggarty turned to Ruder. "Of course, maybe he didn't see Rebecca, just like he said. Maybe you didn't cut your face by tripping over a dog. Maybe that was a convenient way to cover up a cut you'd gotten earlier that morning."

Before Lee could stop him

Ruder was up and across the room and had thrown a right to Haggarty's jaw. Haggarty's head snapped back and he came up with his fist cocked, but Lee was between them and Booker had Ruder from behind. Lee pulled Haggarty out of the kitchen onto the landing.

"Jesus, lieutenant," he said. "What the hell was that? What are you trying to do?"

Haggarty snatched his arm away and paced to the window overlooking the crowd below. He dabbed at his bloody lip with the back of his hand. "Have Booker take him in," he said.

Lee shook his head. "You're asking for trouble. You egged him into it, Ben. He just lost his girl. He saw her all sliced up. Of course he's squirrely."

"He's a maggot. He killed her."

"Come on, lieutenant. You're letting it get to you. Let it go."

"He killed her."

"Maybe Morton killed her. You made a better case there. Maybe the guy who came in the window killed her."

Haggarty leaned on the windowsill and stared down to the group below. "You saw his temper. He lost it with her. He killed her before he knew it. You saw his temper."

Lee put his hand on his shoulder. "If he killed her, let's pop him for that when we get the goods. But let this go now."

From the parking lot, the coroner's wagon was pulling across the lawn toward the crowd. Haggarty turned to Lee. "You talk to him, then. You tell him that out of the kindness of our hearts we're not going to take him in. But tell him he's out of chances, and that he stays where he is until I say otherwise. Tell Booker to stay with them and meet me downstairs."

Haggarty hadn't realized how much he had been sweating until his wet shirt stuck cold to his back and belly in the air of the apartment. Marks was packing his kit. The body was covered.

"Done here," Marks said. "Almost through in the bedroom."

"Time of death?" asked Haggarty.

Marks shrugged. "Hard to tell here, especially with the air conditioning blasting away. Ask the M.E. after the autopsy."

"Come on, Marks, give me a range."

"Six to eighteen. Probably closer to twelve. But that's not news, is it?"

Except for the body, except for the chairs and the coffee table pushed aside in whatever small struggle there was, the room was as neat and orderly as the cabinets, no little cobwebs, no dust balls in the corners, books alphabetical by author, their spines flush with the edges of the shelves. No

cheap romances, no condensed books. History, drama, poetry. He tilted his head. Milton. Aeschylus. Julius Caesar. Haggarty recognized a title or two from college, all sold back to the bookstore at his first opportunity. She had kept hers. Classy lady. Well-read. Why go to raskin' with a hyena? Why even see him?

Haggarty went back to the kitchen. Unlike upstairs, no greasy water in the sink, no trashcan overflowing on the linoleum. Haggarty pushed open the trashcan lid. A beer can, an empty potato chip bag—the trash of the night before. Haggarty suddenly felt lonely, missing his wife as he had not in the five years since she walked.

Lee came in from the living room. "Okay to take the body?"

"She emptied her trash every day," said Haggarty. "Why is she dating a pig like Ruder?"

Lee turned and nodded to the men from the M.E.'s office. They unfolded the body bag next to the covered form on the floor.

"You ready?" asked Lee.

The M.E.'s men lifted the body into the open bag. "She's cold," one of them said.

"You ready?" Lee repeated.

"Maybe that's it," said Haggarty.

"What's it?" said Lee. But Haggarty was already heading for the bedroom.

Marks was watching Kenneth dust the window.

"What was the room temperature?" asked Haggarty.

"Which room?" said Marks.

"Both."

"Living room, sixty-nine degrees Fahrenheit. This room, seventy-five."

"Shouldn't it be warmer? I mean if the window's been opened since one or so this morning, shouldn't it be warmer in both rooms?"

Lee snapped his fingers. "You think Ruder opened it this morning. He killed her last night, then came in and opened the window and called for help so it would look like he found the body."

"Well?" said Haggarty to Marks.

Marks thought a second or two before shaking his head. "Sorry. Won't stand up. That's a big unit pumping away out there, way more than she needed. It could keep it this cool even with this window open, even back here."

"Yeah, well," said Haggarty, "thanks anyway."

"I'll let you know if we pull any prints," said Marks.

"You won't. None that aren't hers, anyway."

"I gotta tell Booker to let them go," said Lee.

"I'll be in the car," said Haggarty.

The heat and the glare out-

side were almost unbearable now. As soon as he hit the sun, Haggarty started sneezing, something he hadn't done since he was a kid. The crowd divided to let him pass, then closed again, waiting the transfer of the body as the signal to go home. The car was an oven in spite of the shade.

"Let's eat," said Lee as he cranked the unit up. Haggarty gave the air conditioning panel a good kick for the sheer pleasure of it rather than in hopes it would do any good.

"Something's missing," said Haggarty. "Something's not right. Ruder's bad on this one."

"How 'bout the park?" said Lee. "Ten degrees cooler. Grab a chili dog and look at the zoo, stretch our legs."

"Chili dog?"

"Sure, makes you sweat, cools you off."

Haggarty laughed. "You're driving."

"What gets me," said Haggarty twenty minutes later, sitting at a picnic table in the shade of a thick-leaved oak, "what gets me is what those two were doing together at all." There was at last a slight breeze, but since it came from the direction of the lion cages, it was not as welcomed as it could have been.

Lee was starting on his second chili dog. Haggarty hadn't touched his. "Lonely," said Lee

around a mouthful. "She's late thirties, single. When you're lonely, lots of people look better than they should."

Haggarty shook his head. "Yeah. Still." He brushed at the flies circling his chili dog. "Such a maggot. She had more class than that."

Lee gave a half laugh. "You talk like you knew her."

Haggarty shrugged. "You see how they live, you get to know them. Compare her apartment with Morton's. They don't look like they're on the same planet, much less the same building. When's the last time her apartment saw a roach, do you think? Or a mouse?"

"Or a fly," said Lee, waving his hand over Haggarty's hot dog. "If you don't eat that soon, they will."

Haggarty looked down. The flies that Lee had shooed away circled only for a second before settling on the chili again. He started to wave them away, then stopped.

"Got him," he said, popping his fist on the table. "Got him, got him, got him. It had to be Ruder." He was up and headed for the car.

"Hey," called Lee, grabbing his drink and Haggarty's hot dog. "Hey! Wait."

Haggarty was in the driver's seat, calling, "Let's go, let's go."

Lee slid into the passenger side, balancing Coke and chili

dog. "What the hell?"

"She made him mad," said Haggarty, backing out of the parking place a little too fast. "Maybe she laughed at him. Maybe she laughed at his wrestling, his rasslin'. I bet he loves that rasslin'. And he doesn't like to be laughed at. He probably didn't mean to kill her, but when it was done, he cleaned up the apartment like she would have, and left. Then he realizes he's not through, that he'll be the prime suspect. So he goes back the next afternoon and finds the body and runs for help, except that before he runs for help, he opens the window."

"I don't see it," said Lee. "Why couldn't Morton have done it? Or why couldn't it be somebody breaking in last night?"

"Because there were no flies," said Haggarty. "A body, fresh blood, a window opened twelve

hours in an August heat wave, and no flies? That place should have been swarming. But a window open twenty or thirty minutes, blood dried, body cooled—the flies would come eventually, but there were no flies when we were there or when Booker was, and he was there fast. That means the window hadn't been open all night. That means somebody had just opened it." He pulled up at a stoplight and turned to Lee. "And that means Ruder."

A fly from the chili dog buzzed past Haggarty's ear and landed on the dash. Haggarty reached for the newspaper beside him and raised it. He hesitated. The fly rubbed its forelegs over each other as if gloating, as if happy to have helped. Haggarty brought the paper down hard.

Lee stared at him. Haggarty shrugged. "Just a fly," he said.

FICTION

Cruise to Death

by
Alexandra
Allan



Reg Symes glanced at his watch as he carefully pulled shut the door of his mother's cabin. Four fifteen. They would be sailing soon. In fact, he felt the change in the vibration of the ship's engines as he stood wondering where to go. Tea would be served outside on B deck, but he didn't feel like listening to more complaints about the breakdown of the air conditioning from the people who had gone on the bus trip. He grinned. Nor did he want to listen to his father gloat over the fact that those who had gone on the long, uncomfortable ride to the Tongass National Forest of Alaska to see blacktailed deer had seen nary an animal, while he, who had stayed in his comfortable deck chair all afternoon, had watched a beautiful specimen pose as if for its portrait on a bluff high above the town. He had kept binoculars on it for at least ten minutes.

On a ship as small as the *Lady Mary* there weren't many places to choose among if you wanted to be outside. A glance aft down the corridor showed him Helen Thorvald standing irresolutely before the door to her employer's stateroom. From her posture he inferred that she was feeling more put-upon than usual. He turned his back and fled up the nearby stairs to the

upper deck where there was a small place at the stern that was seldom used. He lowered himself into the most sheltered of the chairs. Hardly had he opened his book, *The Russian Fur Trade in America*, when Helen perched on the chair two places over. He became absorbed in the book.

"Mr. Symes, I'm so sorry to bother you."

After five days of sitting at the same table with her for every meal, he was sick to death of that meek voice. Why couldn't she call him Reg like every one else did? Instantly, he realized how unfair that was. As a paid companion, she took her cue from her employer. Mrs. Ida May Bellamy would never approve of her dependent's being on equal terms with anyone else on the cruise. The old lady barely tolerated Helen's calling the other member of their table party Greta, even though the two women had discovered that they had known one another as children back in Norway.

With a repressed sigh, he closed the book. As a teacher at a boys' boarding school, he had learned to be tolerant of interruptions. "That's okay, Helen. What can I do for you?"

"I don't know what to do. Who to tell." With both hands, she smoothed back her already sleek blonde hair and tucked some

wisps in the crossed braids at the nape of her neck. "There's no doctor on board, is there?"

It was obviously a rhetorical question. With only two hundred fifty passengers all told, everyone knew everyone else by this time. He supposed a nurse's instinct would be to find a doctor to whom to report.

"Is Mrs. Bellamy ill?"

The look of apprehension she habitually wore had deepened to one of fear.

"She's dead." The knuckles of her hands, now clasped in her lap, turned white.

"Good Lord!" Reg was surprised. Although they had all heard *ad nauseam* about Mrs. Bellamy's digestive troubles and recognized the lameness that confined her to the ship, Reg had considered her a hypochondriac, a match for his father. Some meals were made distinctly uncomfortable by their competitive anticipation of what one dish or another would do to them. Reg had not for a moment believed that the woman was really ill. "I'd better come with you," he said. "To the captain, I suppose. I don't really know the procedure."

He gestured to Helen to precede him, and she led the way down to Mrs. Bellamy's stateroom. There was no one in the adjoining lounge, but they could see through the windows that

the deck outside was crowded with people drinking tea and showing off their purchases.

"I'm not a doctor," Reg was saying as Helen unlocked the door and he followed her in. Then, "Ah!" There was no need of a doctor to say how Mrs. Bellamy had died. She lay on the bed with a crumpled blanket over her legs. Her arms were flung wide, her mouth hung open, and half a pair of scissors jutted from her chest.

He bent over the body. "One wound. Straight to the heart. Would scissors penetrate deep enough?"

He was speaking almost to himself. Helen, however, answered in a calm voice. "They could. But she was old and not well; the shock might have killed her."

Reg looked rapidly round the room. "Have you touched anything?"

"No. I didn't need to touch her to know she's been dead for some time."

"When did you find her?"

"Just a few minutes ago. I came back to the ship before four o'clock."

"You didn't go on the bus trip." It was a statement, not a question, as he knew that the bus had been held five minutes for her.

"No. She kept me busy in here until it was too late. So I

went into town with Greta."

Reg remembered his mother's reaction when the cruise director finally sent the bus off. "Really, Mrs. Bellamy is *too* selfish! To make the girl miss an outing at our last port-of-call! She doesn't need her; she'll only go to sleep as she does every afternoon. She's too selfish for words."

"Never mind," Reg had answered, looking back at the ship. "Her friend's waited for her." He nodded toward the railing where Greta Skaar's distinctive hat—a large straw with a wreath of bright blue cornflowers and long scarlet streamers—contrasted with the white paint gleaming in the August sunshine.

All this time Reg had been looking for signs of an intruder. There were two portholes that opened onto the promenade deck, but they were not big enough to admit anyone. The door showed no signs of forced entry. "Did you come directly here when you got back?" he asked.

"No. We went to my cabin and sorted out our shopping. Mrs. Bellamy had said she would take her tea in the Wicker Room as usual, so I went forward to look for her there. Then I tried the deck in case she'd decided to go outside after all. Then I came in here and found her like that."

Although the stateroom was more spacious than a cabin, it was still small, and Reg had soon scanned the bed, sofa, chest of drawers, and tiny bathroom. Everything looked orderly. "Is anything missing, Miss Thorvald?" he asked, and then wished he'd called her Helen. Would she guess from his sudden formality that she was the best suspect?

Her worried expression lightened for a moment. "Robbery?" she asked.

She immediately opened a drawer in the bedside table, revealing her employer's handbag.

"Wait. Use this." He handed her a linen stole from the chair back. Helen quickly checked through the contents of the purse. Plenty of bills, both Canadian and American, in the wallet; her room key; traveler's checks apparently intact; three credit cards.

"It's all here," she said. The bleak look had returned to her eyes.

"Jewelry?" asked Reg.

Again using the stole, the nurse took a small velvet case from the top bureau drawer. "She didn't travel with anything valuable." She displayed a cameo brooch and earring set, a string of freshwater pearls, and an enameled brooch.

Reg suspected that there was another compartment in the

box, but he didn't ask her to open it. He had suddenly remembered that the death was still unreported and that, anyway, he had no authority to investigate it. Hanging a "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door and ignoring the "Crew Only" sign on the stairwell to the top deck, they knocked on the door of the captain's private quarters and found him and the purser going over some papers. By this time Helen was trembling—delayed shock, Reg surmised—so he told the story. The two men were contrasts in appearance and personality, but their reaction to the news was exactly the same. "We can't afford any more delays or bad publicity!"

Captain Markle was short, plump, and nervous. With three extra people in the cabin, there was no room to pace, so he rocked back and forth on his heels.

"I'm sorry, Miss Thorvald, if that sounded insensitive. This is a shock for you." Then he burst out again. "It's as if the ship were jinxed!"

"I know," murmured Reg sympathetically. At the captain's inquiring stare, he explained, "Two of my friends are members of the syndicate that owns the *Lady Mary*."

"Yes, I remember, I was told so." Captain Markle shrugged. "Then you know . . ." Glancing at the woman passenger, he did

not finish the sentence.

Reg merely nodded. He knew that this was the make-or-break season for the company, which had been plagued since its formation three years ago by a series of misfortunes to its ship. If they didn't make a profit this season, they were going to call it quits—sell the *Lady Mary* and take their losses. One reason why Reg had urged his parents to take this ship instead of one of the big ones when his father came out of the hospital this time was to help out his friends.

"If there's nothing more I can do, Captain Markle, I'll leave you and Miss Thorvald to report the death." As Reg passed the purser, he signaled to him to follow.

Years ago, on another line, some passengers had told Bill Menzies that he resembled the young Jimmy Stewart. Since then, the purser had deliberately cultivated the likeness by imitating the actor's slow, sparse speech and loping walk. "What'd you think?" he asked Reg.

"Nothing yet," answered the other, moving farther away from the door. "While Miss Thorvald is busy with the captain, we should search her room."

"You think she did it?"

In the cabin, Reg warned, "We have no right to be here, so don't leave any traces."

The tall man nodded.

"What're we looking for?"

"Anything belonging to Mrs. Bellamy. Jewelry. Money. Oh, and a pair of scissors."

After a few minutes, Reg asked, "Anything?"

"Nope. Say, you look pleased. Is that good?"

"No scissors. You'd expect a nurse to own a pair of scissors."

"Yeah! Where'd you suppose they are? In the old lady?"

Some passengers were waiting to see the purser in his office. He hurriedly arranged to meet Reg in half an hour in the captain's quarters and was only five minutes late. Captain Markle had been talking to the general manager of the steamship company and to the R.C.M.P. A policeman was due to come aboard from a launch out of Prince Rupert sometime in the night.

"Mr. Benson, our general manager, wants this kept quiet. Miss Thorvald has agreed to say that Mrs. Bellamy is ill. She's going to have dinner in her own cabin tonight. That's one good thing," he added, as if glad to find any consolation. "It won't be hard to watch her. We don't dock again until Saturday morning in Vancouver. She can't go anywhere."

"You think she did it," said the purser.

"I *hope* she did it!" answered Captain Markle. He had been

fidgiting with a pencil and tapping his foot as he talked. Now he swiveled his chair around and looked almost apologetically at Reg. "I don't mean that exactly. But, if it wasn't her, the crew and passengers will all have to be questioned. It will get in all the papers, and we could be tied up for days. By the way, Mr. Symes, Mr. Benson instructed me to ask you if you'd work on the investigation on behalf of the company. Apparently you've had some experience?"

"Yes. I've helped the police on a few occasions."

"That's what he said. We'd be grateful if you could get this wrapped up before we dock on Saturday."

"A tall order, Captain Markle."

"I wish she was a man," declared the captain. "I'd soon get a confession!"

"If she did it."

"Who else?" demanded the little man. "Nothing was stolen, you say. We don't have any homicidal maniacs on board, I suppose."

The nearest thing to a madman, Reg thought, was probably his own father, who had just been discharged after his fourth stay in a psychiatric hospital. But Father was not violent. He *had* been alone on the deck, very close to Mrs. Bellamy's

stateroom all afternoon. Reg suspected, however, that his father admired the woman for her imperious ways rather than disliked her. Dismissing any idea of his father's involvement as ridiculous, he turned again to what the others were saying.

"You sit at her table, Mr. Symes," Menzies said. "What kind of a woman is Miss Thorvald? What do you know about her?"

"Not much. I seldom speak to her except at meals. The old lady didn't encourage her to talk about herself."

"How long had she been with Mrs. Bellamy?"

"Not quite a year, I believe. Before that she was working as a hospital nurse in Toronto. . . . What else? . . . She was born in Norway and trained there."

"She carries a Canadian passport," interrupted the pursuer.

"She came to Canada and wrote exams that allowed her to practice here, then became a Canadian citizen. Her parents are still in Norway, but she hasn't been back since she left. She plans on going home soon, I think."

Bill Menzies grinned. "You seem to be more interested in her than you admit."

Reg shrugged. "No, not really. I know all this because of the other woman at our table, Greta

Skaarl. She's Norwegian. On a holiday. She and Helen got to talking and found out that they grew up in the same little coastal town in Norway. Larsund it's called. They went to school together, in fact, although they don't seem to have been friends. Helen's maybe two or three years older than Greta."

"Is that all? I would have guessed maybe ten years," Menzies said.

"It's the way they dress and the hair style. Helen's a nurse-companion; Greta's a business woman—real estate, I believe. They're both about thirty and they both left Larsund long ago. Helen said her parents still have property there even though they've lived in the city for years."

"Larsund," said Captain Markle. He had been idly tapping a pencil on his desk. Now he began to rap harder as if using the beat as an aid to memory. "Larsund. Where have I heard that name before?" As no inspiration came, he abandoned his efforts to remember. "What about Mrs. Bellamy?" he asked. "All I know about her is that she's a rich widow from an old Toronto family."

"She despised the current government," Reg replied promptly. "Believed very strongly in the privileges of the rich. Didn't like her daughter

and son-in-law very much."

The phone rang. "That will be the dinner call," said the captain. "I will not be dining with the passengers this evening," he said into the mouthpiece. "All officers will eat in the mess tonight. Mr. Menzies is with me. Inform the others." He was frowning as he hung up. "I will have to tell them about the police coming on board and warn them to keep it quiet. What about the body, Mr. Symes?"

"The police will want to see it just as it is. You'll have to warn her steward, Mr. Menzies. Then perhaps, after the police finish, you and I could move it down to cold storage?" The purser nodded. "I'll tell Cindy, our waitress, that Mrs. Bellamy is sick and Helen's staying with her."

The three men rose and the junior officer opened the door for the others. As the captain passed him, he said, "Say! I've just remembered, sir, where we heard that name, Larsund."

"Where?" asked the captain, walking toward the companionway.

"It was that oil fellow we had as a passenger on the first trip of the season. The engineer who got friendly with Scotty."

"I remember. Scotty brought him to the mess one night. He got drunk."

"Yup! And that's when he

talked about this Larsund. Remember? He said his gang had found oil in the North Atlantic—off Scotland and Norway. Said we should all invest in property there because the oil companies would need lots of land for refineries or something."

"Telling secrets, was he?" laughed Reg.

"Yup, and mighty sorry the next morning. Didn't matter, though, none of us had any money to invest."

The buzz of conversation from passengers on their way to the dining room drifted down the corridor.

"I'll have you called when the police arrive, Mr. Symes," said the captain.

In the dining room, Cindy offered to send dinner to the absentees.

"Thanks, the steward's taking care of it," Reg replied. "What's wrong, Father? You're not feeling sick, too, are you?"

"No. Only sorry. I suppose I disturbed her this afternoon; but I didn't know she was ill."

"There, dear, don't fuss," said his wife. "Eat your soup before it gets cold. It really is good tonight."

"Delicious!" agreed Greta.

"What do you mean?" Reg asked his father.

"I couldn't help laughing when I saw the blacktail deer up on

that rock. And the rest of you had gone for miles into the forest looking for one." He sprinkled salt and pepper into his bowl and stirred the soup as he spoke. "I thought Mrs. Belamy would enjoy the joke, so I went and knocked on her door. It was two thirty; she's usually up by that time. But if she's sick, I'm sorry I disturbed her."

"She didn't answer you?"

"No. But if you don't believe I saw the deer, ask the watchman. He came along just then and I pointed it out to him. He told me they often see animals up there. Bah! I can't eat this soup! It's cold! You know I like my soup piping hot, Mildred. And it's salty, too."

The watchman would be able to tell the exact time he had spoken to Father, but it seemed safe to assume that Mrs. Bellamy was dead by two thirty. Reg chatted with Greta about her afternoon in town and discovered that the two women had been together constantly from the time they left the ship. Assuming Helen did it, she must have killed Mrs. Bellamy when they were all on the bus feeling sorry for her.

"Well, you didn't miss much when you missed the trip," he said.

Greta leaned back to allow the waitress to serve her red snapper. "I didn't care one way

or the other," she said. "But Helen was upset."

"She didn't actually say anything against Mrs. Bellamy, did she?" asked Mrs. Symes.

Greta laughed. "No, she never does. Such patience! She wasn't herself, that's all. A bit nervous, preoccupied, not with it, as I told her in one store when she couldn't figure out the prices in Canadian dollars."

Later Reg was mulling over the meaning of Helen's preoccupation as he sat in a dim corner of the Wicker Room with his feet up on the coffee table and an open book face down on his lap. Bridge was being played rather boisterously at two tables in the middle of the room; the cruise director and her assistant were setting up for the concert which would start soon. Cheerful conversations were going on all over the room. So far, no one seemed to know that there had been a murder on board. Reg wondered how long it could be kept quiet. His mother sat down opposite him and took out her knitting. Another sweater for the grandchildren. When did they ever wear them all?

After a moment she asked quietly, "Is Mrs. Bellamy dead?"

"How did you know?"

"There was an empty tray outside Helen's door. None outside Mrs. Bellamy's."

Reg laughed. "You should be a detective."

"No. I leave that to you." She counted stitches for a moment, then asked casually, "Was it murder?"

"Mother!" He swung his legs off the table and sat upright.

"Oh, it's all right. No one else suspects. It's just because I'm your mother. I can always tell when you're detecting."

He grinned. "Well, you're right this time. It was murder. Stabbed with scissors."

Another passenger called a greeting from across the room and she nodded in reply before asking, "Who did it?"

"The captain strongly favors Helen Thorvald. You know, the rich woman and the ill-treated companion. Finally she rebels."

The knitting needles clicked loudly for a few minutes; a slight frown was the only other sign of agitation.

"But was she, dear? Ill-treated, I mean. Oh, I know Mrs. Bellamy was a wee bit demanding on occasion and a bit testy—but, Heaven knows, your father in one of his difficult times has said much worse things to me. And I haven't murdered him."

"That's true, but I sometimes think you have the patience of a saint."

"Well, I haven't, dear. Not at all. I often get very impatient

with him. And I often get very depressed when one of his spells goes on and on and I know I'm tied to him for life. But, *not*, I assure you, to the point of thinking of murder. And that's another thing about Miss Thorvald. She hadn't to look forward to being companion to Mrs. Bellamy for very long. Don't you remember her telling us she was saving up to go back to Norway?"

"Are you saying Helen did not murder the old lady?"

"No, dear, I'm not saying that she didn't do it. You're the detective, not me. What I'm saying is that it wasn't because she was a downtrodden companion, because she wasn't."

"You mean, I must rethink the motive?"

"Yes, dear, that's all I mean." She jumped as the loudspeaker emitted a long, thin squeal. "Gracious, why can't they ever turn that thing low before they switch it on?" Rolling up her knitting, she added, "Your father won't want to listen to the concert. I'll see if he'd like a game of cribbage."

"I'll play him, Mother. You stay for the music."

In the evenings, the small lounge off which the staterooms opened became a games room and library. Tonight there was a Scrabble game going on near the door, and two men were

reading in opposite corners of the window wall. It was pitch black on the deck outside, but some sound wafted down from the bar on the deck above. Reg chose a table in the middle of the room and seated his father with his back to Stateroom A where Mrs. Bellamy's body still lay. The elder Mr. Symes wondered briefly whether it was something she ate for lunch that made the old lady ill, but he soon forgot her in anticipation of the game. Half of Reg's attention, however, was given to the murder. Supposing Helen hadn't killed her before she'd gone off the ship with Greta. Then the murderer must have gone into Stateroom A sometime between about one forty-five and two thirty when Mrs. Bellamy failed to answer his father's knock. Could Father have seen the person?

As he dealt the cards, Reg asked casually, "Did you spend the whole afternoon on the deck?"

"Yes, I did." The older man gathered the cards and held them in a fan close to his chest. "In blissful solitude."

"Nobody else stayed on board?" Reg frowned at his hand, muttering, "I hate these three and three splits."

His father chuckled. "These two cards won't sweeten the crib for you. No, after Miss

Skaarl left, I didn't see another soul till the watchman came." He spoke with the satisfaction of one who had been watched over for too long.

"Oh, did Miss Skaarl keep you company? That was nice of her."

"I didn't need company! I meant I could see her sitting in here. In one of those chairs by the window. No mistaking that hat of hers. She was waiting for her friend."

They played in silence until both had crossed the skunk line. The older man was slightly ahead and he watched sourly as his son counted up and pegged ten points in one hand.

"I can't stand that woman," he said suddenly.

"What woman?"

"That nurse. Mrs. Bellamy's companion." The jack turned up. "Ha! Two for his nibs! That's a good omen."

"You don't like nurses, period."

"They're all hypocrites. 'It's quite all right, Mrs. Bellamy. I don't mind a bit.' Talking about missing the bus. I saw her expression when we came up from lunch. She was ready to murder the old woman."

Reg threw his father a startled look, but it seemed to be just a figure of speech. "When did she say this?" he asked while counting up his hand.

"When she was leaving—before she closed the door."

So, thought Reg, Mrs. Bellamy was alive then. Or was Helen putting on an act for anyone who might overhear? Was she clever enough for that?

"She's stupid, too!" his father declared. Just six points short of winning, he was postponing having to look at his crib.

"Come on, Father, that's a little harsh."

"Wouldn't you call it brainless not to know her own handbag? She got them mixed up again today. I heard her when she came along the passage there. 'Oh, Greta,' " he mimicked, " 'look, I've got your bag.' Stupid woman."

"I thought you said Greta was inside."

"She came out and leaned on the rail there. Thought her friend was taking too long, I guess. Everybody's in a hurry these days—except me and Mrs. Bellamy."

Reg didn't agree that Helen was stupid, but taking the wrong bag reinforced Greta's impression that she had been upset. Unless she wanted something out of it? But what?

"Ha! I've won! Beat the schoolteacher again! Look here, four points in my hand and ten in the crib. Want another game?"

"Sure." As his father dealt,

Reg stared at the door of State-room A. If Mrs. Bellamy had been killed *after* Helen left her, it must have been by someone who had a key or by a professional thief who knew how to open a door without leaving a trace. Could robbery have been the motive? Both the purser and the steward would have keys but they also had ample opportunity to enter when the cabin was empty. Why wait till Mrs. Bellamy was there? The same objection applied to a thief. Unless Helen was the thief. If she took a valuable piece of jewelry, Mrs. Bellamy would know. So, to get away with it, Mrs. Bellamy would have to die. The murder had certainly been premeditated; no one carries around a half pair of scissors. Who else on board knew the old lady well enough to want to murder her?

Throughout the game, Reg went on chatting and asking questions. His father was sure that he could see clearly from the deck into this room and that no one had entered from the time Greta left until he himself had knocked at Mrs. Bellamy's door. Of course, there must have been times when his attention was elsewhere; he had watched the deer, for instance. Shortly after the watchman had passed, two waiters had arrived on deck to set up for afternoon tea and passengers had begun to drift

back aboard. No one would risk going into Stateroom A after that. It did look as if Mrs. Bellamy must have been dead when Father knocked on her door at two thirty. And, in spite of Mother's objections, it looked more and more as if only Helen could have reason to kill her. After all, they only had Helen's word that her employer carried nothing of value.

The next day, Reg tried this theory out on Inspector Norm Follows when he, the inspector, and Constable Kennedy were alone in the captain's quarters after breakfast. The policemen had examined the body, photographed the scene, made maps after a tour of the ship, and heard reports from Captain Markle, Bill Menzies, and Reg. The captain and purser had now returned to their duties, leaving the other three men in the captain's cabin.

"She's going home to Norway soon. Maybe she wants to show off a bit—splash some money around?" suggested Reg.

"Does she strike you as that kind of person?"

"Frankly, no. Well, maybe she heard that property in her home town, what's its name?, Larsund, was going to be valuable and decided to buy some."

The inspector's black eyebrows joined into one thin line. "Not very likely, is it? The oil

company would be keeping that pretty dark."

"The captain heard about it."

"Yes. Well, we'll keep it in mind. I'd better talk to the lady now. Since I agreed to cooperate with Captain Markle as far as possible in keeping this from the passengers, would you be good enough to bring her here? I imagine the presence of two strange men on board would start some talk, even though we're both in civvies."

"It would indeed! I'll get her."

Reg found Helen in her cabin with Greta, who was dressed for the sun in the briefest of yellow shorts topped by an oversized white and yellow cotton pull-over. The nurse swayed and sat down abruptly on the bunk when he asked her to come with him.

"Now, there *is* something wrong, Helen!" said her friend. "Why should you be frightened of Reg?"

"Oh, Greta, Mrs. Bellamy's dead and they think I did it."

"What?" Greta looked in astonishment from the trembling woman to the man leaning silently against the closed door.

"It's true. She was stabbed with scissors yesterday while we were in town." A sob choked her.

Greta held out a hand and Helen grabbed it convulsively.

"This is preposterous! They

can't believe you killed anyone."

"Inspector Follows just wants a report from you, Helen," Reg said quietly.

"Who's Inspector Follows?" demanded Greta.

"A policeman who came on board last night. To investigate the murder."

"Murder! I can't believe this!"

Helen, more composed, stood up, and the other woman impulsively hugged her. "I'll come with you." She looked at Reg defiantly.

"At least you can come and speak to the inspector. He will say whether you can stay with her."

The policeman treated the request calmly. "We're not here to accuse you of anything, Miss Thorvald. At this time, I just want to get your account of how you found Mrs. Bellamy and a statement of your movements during the afternoon. Constable Kennedy will make notes of what you say. Mr. Symes is representing the steamship company, who naturally are anxious to get this cleared up as soon as possible. If you'd like your friend to stay, I've no objection at this stage."

"Thank you, sir, I would like it."

The inspector indicated chairs for everyone. Helen was directly opposite him on the other side of the desk. Reg noted with

an inward smile that the best Greta could do was to cross her bare legs so that her shapely ankle and foot swung into the policeman's range of vision occasionally.

"Tell me about finding the body, Miss Thorvald."

Helen told him the same story she'd told Reg and went on to how she had gone first to Reg and then with him to the captain, who had asked her to stay in her cabin. "He thinks I did it. I know he does. But I didn't kill her. You know that when you saw her, Mr. Symes, she'd been dead more than a few minutes."

"Yes."

"Well, she was alive when I left her. I . . ." They all waited in silence. "Your father! Mr. Symes, your father was standing at the rail right opposite her door. I was talking to her after I opened it—looking back in, you know? He *must* have heard us. She was apologizing for keeping me late."

"He heard you speaking to her," Reg replied.

"Oh! Thank goodness!"

If Helen missed the implications of his reply, Greta didn't. "Mrs. Bellamy always spoke very quietly. One got the impression that a lady never raises her voice. She wouldn't be heard right across the lounge."

"That's so!" declared Helen.

Reg was not deceived by the inspector's mild and courteous manner into thinking that he accepted their version of events, but he wondered if the women were.

"Will you tell us, please, what happened from, say, the end of lunch. I understand you and Mrs. Bellamy were the last to leave the table."

"Yes. I felt sorry for Cindy—our waitress—because she wanted to go to town, too. I knew Mrs. Bellamy was deliberately dallying so I'd miss the bus. Anyway, there was nobody except the older Mr. Symes using the elevator, so we had a quick ride up and it was just one thirty when we got to her room and I thought I might still be on time. But she had me doing all sorts of little jobs."

"Like what, Miss Thorvald?"

"Oh, I don't remember—just time wasters. Like rubbing her good shoes, which didn't need it. Oh, finding her glasses; she'd slipped them under the pillow. Then we heard the bus go and she let me give her her tablets and she lay down. I covered her with a blanket and left her—alive!"

"How did you feel about missing the trip? Resentful, perhaps?"

"Not particularly. I know her, you see. She doesn't, didn't, like it when people paid attention to me. At lunch Mrs. Symes,

and Greta, too, were both being kind, saying they'd save me a window seat, things like that. And I knew she was jealous."

"Because she couldn't go?" asked Reg, who doubted it.

"No, no. That sort of trip wouldn't interest her. No, just because they were treating her companion like a human being."

"And where did you go after you left her stateroom, Miss Thorvald?"

"To my own cabin."

"Meet anyone on the way?"

"Yes, our waitress. She came charging up the stairs just as I got to my door. She said something like, 'Oh, she kept you late, too!' Then she advised me to go into town and dashed off."

"And you decided to do that?"

"Yes, I thought I might as well. She said there were one or two good stores. So, I changed to a pants suit and then checked my purse to be sure I had enough American money. And discovered I had taken Greta's purse by mistake. They're so much alike." She indicated her straw bag as it lay on her lap and gestured towards her friend's. "It's happened before. We both put them under the table in the dining room."

Reg caught the inspector's eye and, receiving a small nod, asked, "How did you open your door if you had the wrong purse, Helen?"

"Oh, I carry my key in my

pocket. Mine in my pocket and Mrs. Bellamy's in my purse so as not to get them mixed up."

"I see. So Mrs. Bellamy let you into her stateroom."

"Yes. Well, then I decided to see if Greta had waited, seeing she had the wrong purse, so I went on deck and found her."

"I didn't even know," said the other woman, with a laugh. "Not until Helen told me."

"Yet you waited. That was kind of you, Miss Skaarl." The policeman rewarded her with a smile.

"Well, anyone could see the old lady was being deliberately mean. I didn't particularly care about going to the forest—we've got lots of trees in Norway. So, I thought I'd keep Helen company in town."

"Where did you wait?"

"On the deck till the bus left. Then I went in and sat in the lounge where I could see Mrs. Bellamy's door."

"And did Miss Thorvald come out of that door?"

"No. She must have gone before I sat down. So, I went back on deck and that's where we met."

"Do you know what time that was?"

"No, not exactly."

"There's a sailor who keeps watch on the gangplank when we're in port," Helen broke in. "He was there when we walked

off; he might know the time."

"If we need to know, we'll ask him. Did you spend the rest of the afternoon together?"

"Yes, every minute," answered Greta emphatically, "until Helen went to look for Mrs. Bellamy, as she told you."

There was silence for almost a full minute. Only Helen fidgeted.

Then Follows asked, "Do you own a pair of scissors, Miss Thorvald?"

"Yes."

"Where do you keep them?"

"In my nurse's bag, in my cabin. They're not there. I looked to see."

Her voice cracked and Greta spoke up indignantly. "Lots of people own scissors, Inspector Follows. I daresay Mrs. Bellamy had a pair. I have some myself."

Helen had control of her voice again and she broke in. "They weren't my scissors that killed her. I looked to see. They didn't have my mark on them."

"Your mark?"

"At the hospital all the nurses' scissors looked the same. I scratched my initials on both sides of the join. If you look, you'll see there's no mark on the ones that killed Mrs. Bellamy."

The inspector made a note and then asked, "Where are your scissors, Miss Skaarl?"

"In my purse." She began to rummage energetically. "Funny! They're not here."

"May I see?"

She handed over the bag, but the inspector had no better luck.

"Are you sure they were in here?"

"Of course. That's where I keep them."

"Where do you think they are, then?"

"I'm beginning to wonder, inspector!" she said with a quick, grim look at Helen.

"Greta! You can't think I took them!"

"No. No, of course not. I must have used them and forgotten to put them back. I'll find them."

Not very likely, thought Reg. At least, not the missing half. They were likely at the bottom of Queen Charlotte Sound.

"For goodness sakes, Helen," Greta went on. "Pull yourself together. We'll get you a lawyer. That must be a right in this country, isn't it, Inspector Follows?"

"Miss Thorvald will be given all the help she needs, Miss Skaarl."

"If it's a question of money," she began belligerently.

"No! Greta! I forbid you to tell my parents!"

"You are both going much too fast," Follows said soothingly. "All we're asking of Miss Thorvald is that she be available to

answer a few questions. Why don't you both go out in the sun while we check up on some of the times you've given us?"

"I'd rather be alone," said Helen somewhat stiffly as she walked to the door.

Her friend replied, "Whatever you say, Helen. But if you want me, I'll be on the sun deck."

"Do you want me to check those times, sir?" asked the constable as he closed the door.

"Yes, please, Rory, with both the waitress and the watchman. See if you can get the exact time that the waitress saw Miss Thorvald at her door. They must have to sign out. Also, ask if she actually saw her enter the cabin."

After he had gone, Reg said, "She *did* change her clothes. I don't know how long that would take."

"With my wife, usually half an hour. But she has done it in five minutes."

"Still, pretty tight timing. She'd have to be back in Mrs. Bellamy's stateroom before Greta sat down in the lounge and wait there till Greta got bored and went out again."

"Miss Skaarl was vague about times."

"Yes. So was Father. Even so . . . no, I think if Helen did it, she killed her before she met Cindy in the corridor." He

paused for a moment. "Have you wondered why she made it look so much like murder?"

"It *was* murder," replied Follows.

"But surely, as a nurse and her constant companion, there were less obvious ways of killing her. Give her the wrong pills, or too many of them. Knock her downstairs—she was lame. It could have been made to look like an accident."

"I can think of one reason for making murder obvious," replied Follows, "but I don't see motive."

"I have a glimmer about motive," Reg replied. "Tell you in a moment. First let's see how it works out otherwise."

They discussed timing, the missing scissors, keys, and the psychology of the murderer, and by the time Constable Kennedy returned, they had decided that the R.C.M.P. would ask for the cooperation of the Norwegian police in making certain inquiries in that country.

"Will you hold up the ship while you wait for an answer?" Reg asked.

"That depends . . . Oh, here's Rory now."

"Cindy Naumann booked out at one forty-five," the constable reported. "She looked back from the dock and saw Miss Thorvald at her porthole. The watchman says the two women

came down the gangplank just a minute or two before he was relieved at two o'clock."

"That gives us enough to hold her for questioning. No, Mr. Symes, we won't have to detain the ship. I'll arrange for cars to meet us at the dock in Vancouver early tomorrow morning. The ship docks at seven thirty, I think?"

"Yes. And the passengers don't leave until after breakfast—say about eight thirty—so you should be able to get her and the body off without anyone's noticing anything unusual."

"We'll be as discreet as possible, but this *is* murder, Mr. Symes."

"Of course, of course. I'm not telling you how to do your job. I'll help in any way I can."

Mollified, the policeman said, "Keep an eye on her today and bring her to us in the morning."

Mindful of these instructions, Reg asked Helen and Greta to join himself and his parents in the bar for a pre-dinner cocktail. Everyone was dressed up for the captain's farewell party. Helen had loosened her hair, put on makeup, and wore a dress that Mrs. Bellamy would certainly not have approved. In the gaily-decorated dining room, Reg admired the professionalism of the officers and catering staff. It could not be usual to

have a murderer among the guests, yet everyone from the captain on down acted as though they had nothing on their minds but the comfort and amusement of the passengers.

Next morning, Reg found his parents, Greta, and Helen all at their usual table for breakfast. Bending down, he said quietly to Helen, "Inspector Follows would like to see you."

The woman turned deathly pale and clutched the edge of the table. Mrs. Symes reached across and clasped one white hand. "Dear! Shall I come, too?"

"I will go, Mrs. Symes," said Greta firmly. She pushed back from the table, scooped up the two handbags, and stood up. "Come, Helen, be brave. You must get it over with."

Watching them leave, Mrs. Symes sighed and pushed away her porridge plate.

Her husband looked up from his bowl in time to see the gesture. "What's this?" he asked testily. "Is nobody eating breakfast but me?"

"You finish yours, dear. Here comes Cindy with your egg and toast. I need some fresh air."

From the deck she looked down on a police car and an ambulance. It should be a hearse, she thought, but I suppose that would frighten people. In a minute a procession started

down the gangplank. It was led by two stretcher bearers carrying a blanket-swathed body. While they loaded their burden into the back, a young policeman helped Helen Thorvald mount to the passenger seat of the ambulance. An older officer escorted Greta Skaarl to the cruiser. Reg joined his mother.

"So, it was Miss Skaarl who killed her," she said.

"Yes."

"When?"

"Just after our bus left the dock. When Father was watching her flamboyant hat stuck up on something—maybe an ashtray—in the lounge window. She had taken Helen's bag with the key in it."

"Dear, dear! Why?"

"It's not proved yet, but I suspect she was cheating Helen's parents, among others, out of their property in Larsund. Somebody's going to make a fortune there in real estate."

"That's the business she's in," replied his mother. "I thought she'd be very good at making deals. Hardnosed is what she is. Much more satisfactory as a murderer than poor Helen Thorvald."

"Mother! Anyway, the police have started inquiries in Norway. I wouldn't be surprised to find she's been buying up most of the property in that town."

Mrs. Symes looked puzzled.

"But why murder Mrs. Bellamy?"

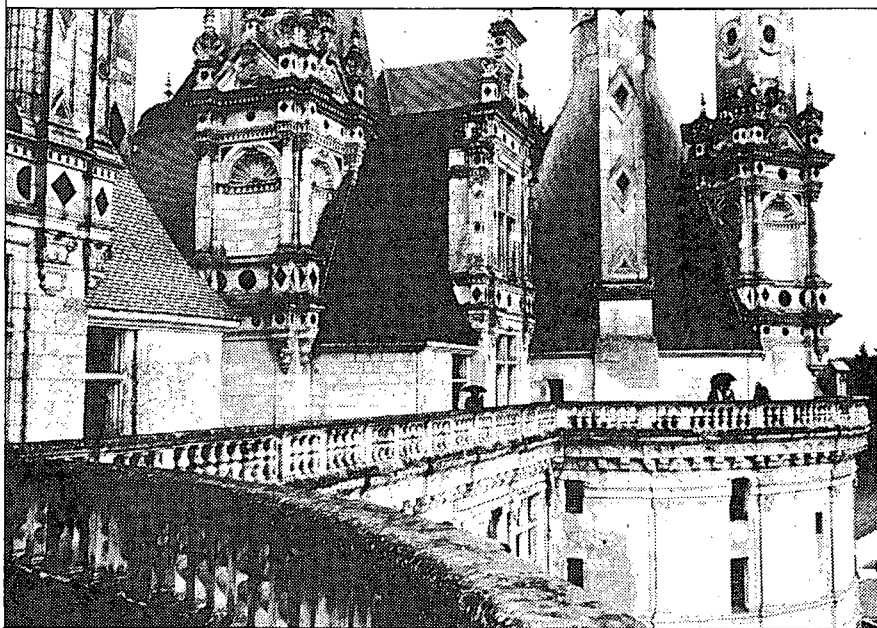
"To prevent Helen from going home before she got the deal finished. Helen might not have been so easy to cheat. I expect Greta came on this cruise deliberately. We know she had seen Helen's parents lately; they probably told her about the trip Helen was taking with her employer. And that she'd be coming home soon." He misinterpreted his mother's sudden frown. "Don't you see? If Helen was charged with murder, she

wouldn't be allowed to leave the country. Why are you shaking your head? It makes sense. It might even hurry the deal up. Helen's parents might want money to help her with legal expenses."

"Oh, I understand all that perfectly. Her greed got the better of her morals. I was thinking of poor Mrs. Bellamy. The murder had really nothing to do with her. It was her companion who was important. She wouldn't have liked that! Not at all!"

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



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The winning entry for the Mid-December Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

True Confession

by B. K. Stevens

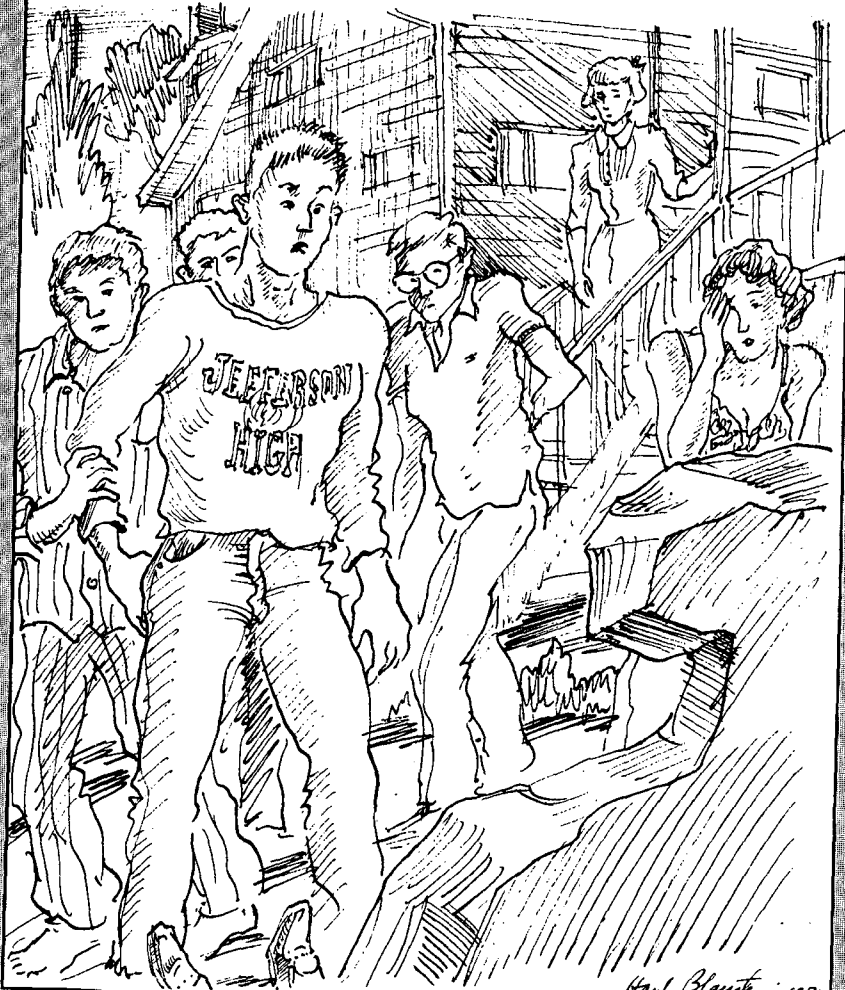


Illustration by Hank Blaustein

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Dear Mother,
I've got to say your last letter hurt a little. You've got no reason to be worried about Ellen and me, and absolutely no reason to be upset. I didn't do anything. How often have I told you that the newspapers always get things mixed up? Well, they did it again. And I don't mean just the part about Bolt. Everybody always gets that part mixed up, including Bolt himself, so you can hardly blame the newspapers for not understanding. But they were mixed up about other things, too, and they dropped a lot of hints about stuff that never happened.

I'll tell you how it really was. At first, it seemed perfectly respectable, even—well, even distinguished. About three months ago, Mrs. Jessica Winchester called me at work. Just hearing the name shook me up pretty good. I couldn't imagine why the governor's widow would be calling me. And when she told me I was getting an Arthur T. Winchester Memorial Award for Citizenship, I about fell over.

"A what?" I asked, and could have punched myself for sounding so tactless, and so dumb.

"An Arthur T. Winchester Memorial Award for Citizenship." She has a deep, warm voice, a little on the breathy side. "I'm instituting the awards

this year, in honor of my late husband. Four other people will also receive them. Your award, Lieutenant Johnson, is for bringing the Eastside Strangler to justice. I'll present the awards at a Fourth of July ceremony at my home. We expect a large press attendance. Will you come?"

"Sure," I said, overwhelmed. "That's great. Sure. You bet." I realized I was fumbling, and squeezed my eyes shut so I could grope out the right words. "Thank you. This is a great honor."

"You're welcome," she said, smooth as cream. "I'd like you to come up on July third, for dinner and a reception, and then spend the night. We have a full day of activities planned for the Fourth. Bring your wife, by all means. And for the dinner on the third, you might also bring that sergeant who assisted you on the Eastside case. What was his name? Dolt?"

"Bolt," I said, wincing. "Gordon Bolt." And he didn't just assist me, I wanted to say. He solved the case for me, and never realized he'd done it, and shoved all the credit at me because he thought I deserved it. I'll tell you, Mother, a lot of the fun went out of the award right then, because I realized Bolt should be getting it, not me. But my stomach clenched at the

thought of explaining that to Mrs. Winchester, so I just thanked her again and hung up.

Now, I want you to understand one thing. I *did* ask Ellen to go with me on the third, and she *did* want to come. She was all hot about spending a night at the Winchester estate, and you should see the dress she bought for the reception. But at the last minute the Little League coach decided Kevin could pitch on the third, and since it was his first time, we figured at least one of us should be there, and obviously it had to be Ellen. We were both plenty unhappy about it. Ellen was a good sport, though, as always, and said she and Kevin would drive up for the awards ceremony on the Fourth, and she'd save her new dress for the captain's retirement dinner.

So that's how Bolt and I ended up driving to the Winchester estate together on the third. He wanted to drive, of course, but for once I wouldn't let him. It's a solid two-hour drive, and I didn't want him stretching it out to three with wrong turns and dangerously slow speeds. He did most of the talking, though, chattering about wouldn't it be fun to meet all those wonderful people, and what did I think Mrs. Winchester would serve for dinner, and

wasn't I nice to let him tag along? When we got to the Winchester estate, even Bolt ran out of words. I can't begin to describe it, Mother. All I can say is that after living in this place, Mrs. Winchester must have found the governor's mansion downright cramped. We drove down a path bordered by skinny trees with pointy leaves, past a tennis court and a pool, wondering if we'd ever reach the house. Finally, we saw it—huge and angular and artsy, looking like an overgrown lakeside cabin, all redwood walls and jutting ledges and wide, short windows. In front of the house was a large wooden platform, raised some six feet off the ground. It was crowded with flags and chairs and workmen and stuff, and in the center stood Mrs. Winchester, waving to us.

Yes, Mother, she *is* goodlooking, and I guess I couldn't help noticing, but that doesn't mean I ever thought of doing anything about it. I'm a happily married man. Besides, she isn't my type—too polished and perfect, the kind who always holds her shoulders back and never seems to sweat. Carefully, as though she didn't trust the sturdiness of the stairs, she walked down from the platform and gave us a barely-upturned smile. She always smiled that

way, I noticed later, probably because she's afraid of wrinkling.

"So glad you could come," she said, shaking my hand. "You're Lieutenant Johnson, aren't you? I recognize you from your pictures in the newspaper. And this must be Sergeant Bolt."

At least she got his name right this time. I mumbled something about why Ellen couldn't come and how nice the platform looked. "Is that where you're holding the ceremony tomorrow night?" I asked.

She frowned a barely-down-turned frown. "Yes. We hope to make it quite impressive, with speeches and music and fireworks. We expect close to a thousand people. I just hope we can be ready in time. And *that*, of course, is a major disappointment." She pointed to a big black thing sitting on a wheeled cart at the far end of the platform. "Brian Percy himself sculpted it for me—and received a handsome commission for it, too. I'd hoped it would lend a properly patriotic tone to the ceremony. But now that I've seen it, I hardly know whether to use it at all. Well, I'll decide in the morning. If you'll excuse me, lieutenant, I'll go check on your room."

She took off for the house. I was still staring at the big black thing. "What do you think

it's supposed to be?" I whispered to Bolt.

"My guess would be the Liberty Bell, sir," he whispered back promptly.

I tipped my head to the side and squinted. If you caught it from just the right angle, it did sort of look like a bell. Not exactly like a bell, no—but then, cultured people like Mrs. Winchester usually don't want art to look exactly like the thing it's supposed to be. "I wonder why she's so upset," I said. "Maybe some of her friends made cracks about the bell."

Bolt chuckled. "That's a good one, sir. Very clever. It's a shame the artist didn't make a crack, isn't it?"

I stared at him, then at the bell again. So that was the problem. No crack. I felt sorry for Mrs. Winchester: stuck with an ugly Liberty Bell the size of an obese midget, and it wasn't even cracked. And I felt disgusted with myself, and annoyed with Bolt for once again realizing the truth and assuming I had realized it first.

He had a fine time at dinner, eating everything in sight and bragging about what a brilliant young detective I am and what a privilege it is for a tired old-timer like him to watch me at work. I didn't say much. It was intimidating, being surrounded by so many almost-famous peo-

ple and knowing that they, unlike me, had actually earned their awards.

In some ways, the reception afterwards was even harder to take. There must have been two hundred people there, and after letting them mingle and nibble for a while, Mrs. Winchester herded all the award recipients together to stand behind her while she gave a little speech. She talked about what a terrible loss it was, to her and to the entire state, when her husband died of a heart attack six months ago. At first, she said, she'd felt lost without him, but then she'd decided to devote her life to his memory and his ideals. To this end, she said, she'd established the Arthur T. Winchester Memorial Foundation and was serving as its president. She got sort of teary then, saying how she hoped her little foundation would be worthy of her dear Arthur, and everyone looked awful sorry for her. But she cheered up when she got to the description of the foundation's first project, the citizenship awards to be presented each year on the Fourth of July.

The introductions came next, and she nudged us forward in alphabetical order. "This is Gerald Brooke," she said, beaming, "the deservedly renowned investigative reporter for *The Evening Post*. The pen-

sions of thousands of workers are safer now, thanks to his searing exposé of corruption in one of our major unions. And this young man is Glen Crimmins, the quarterback for Jefferson High. Last summer, while jogging along the river, he saw two children in danger of drowning. With complete disregard for his own safety, without even pausing to take off his shoes, he plunged into the water and saved both youngsters. Next is Lieutenant Walter Johnson, who caught the Eastside Strangler. When far more experienced officers had despaired of ever solving the case, Lieutenant Johnson revived the investigation with his dazzling insights and singlehandedly identified the killer. Equally heroic is Dr. Owen Lloyd. This year, he capped his long and distinguished career in medicine by opening a clinic for AIDS victims. And, finally, we have Penelope Marsh, better known to children across the state as Miss Penny, for almost twenty years the beloved schoolmistress of Channel Seven's *Little Learners' Land*. Recently, she initiated a statewide campaign to teach our young people about both the dangers of drugs and the importance of good manners. We all wish her great success with her marvelously innovative

'Just Say No Thank You' campaign."

Then there was a lot of clapping, and we all smiled, and a bunch of people pushed forward with cameras. I kept trying to pull Bolt into the pictures and to say I hadn't managed the Eastside case all that single-handedly, but as usual no one paid attention. The reporters weren't especially interested in me, anyway. Most of them were homing in on Mrs. Winchester or Gerald Brooke, and I could understand why. I've got to admit it, Mother—she looked good that night, in a swirly black gown with one long sleeve, and one arm and shoulder left bare. No governor could have asked for a more spectacular widow. As for Gerald Brooke, he looked almost as pretty as she did, wearing a three-piece suit cut so precisely he could have slid into it, and these hand-sewn Italian loafers so classy it was a shame to let them touch the floor. I bet he worked out, too, and paid fifty dollars for a haircut; and from ten feet away you could see he'd had his teeth capped.

"I'd say he's trying for a television job, sir," Bolt whispered.

"It's sad, isn't it?" Dr. Lloyd remarked. Like Bolt and me, he had been edged aside by the crush of reporters encircling Brooke. Lloyd's a tall, gaunt

man somewhere in his sixties. At dinner, he'd been lively and full of jokes, but now he looked sour. "A man like Brooke can build himself quite a reputation by destroying the reputations of others."

"Some of his stories have been pretty nasty," I agreed. "But I have to give him credit for getting Lazell indicted."

"Oh, I have no quarrel with exposing crooks like Lazell," Dr. Lloyd said. "But preying on men whose worst mistakes have been misfortunes is quite another matter." He commanded a drink from a passing waiter. "I'd like to hear more about the Eastside case, lieutenant. I'm writing a mystery novel about a serial killer, and I'm sure your insights would help."

"Sure," I said, glancing at Bolt. Before I could help the doctor, I'd have to get Bolt to explain my insights to me again. "I'm surprised you find time for writing, with all the work you do at the clinic."

"Finding time is easy," he said ruefully. "Finding a publisher isn't. So far, my tally is eight novels, over two hundred rejections, and no acceptances. I've been at it since medical school and can't seem to give it up. I must be drawn to hopeless causes." He sighed, probably thinking about his patients.

"Well, I'll give it one last try. With your help, maybe I can at least make this one more realistic than the others."

"Sounds good," I said. But Miss Penny and Glen Crimmins joined us then, and it didn't seem right to discuss a strangler in front of either of them. Miss Penny looks just like she does on television—just like she did on television twenty years ago, in fact, all bright and blonde and bouncy, with thick, straight bangs and a curly pony tail. She was wearing a flowered pink dress with a little round collar, the kind she wears on her show. From a distance, you'd think she was Glen Crimmins' kid sister—he's so big, and she's so tiny, and they're both so clean-cut looking.

Right away, I asked for her autograph. "It's for my son," I said. "He's ten now, but when he was little, he never missed your show. And after every one, he'd say, 'When I grow up, I'm going to marry Miss Penny.'"

"Did he?" she said, with a smile so sweet it would turn salt to sugar. "How adorable! And is he enjoying school now? I'm always so interested to hear about how my Little Learners do when they become big boys and girls."

"He's doing all right," I said, deciding not to depress her by being too precise. "But every year, after he meets his new

teacher, he comes home and sighs, 'Well, she's no Miss Penny.' Fact is, he still sneaks a peek at your show sometimes, when he thinks we're not looking."

"So do I," Glen Crimmins said, smiling sheepishly. "When I'm babysitting for my cousins, I mean. It's a great show, Miss Penny."

Her eyes glowed. "Would you like to be a guest star some day? On one of my anti-drug programs, perhaps?"

"You mean it?" He let out a little whoop. "Gosh! To be on *your* show! I'd love it, Miss Penny. And would I ever have stuff to say about drugs! When I think of the creeps who try to peddle that garbage to poor little kids—well gosh! I just want to make them stop, that's all."

So you see, Mother, it all seemed real innocent and wholesome. Nothing else much happened. Mrs. Winchester came over to chat with us, and then Dr. Lloyd and I strolled off to get another drink and talk about the Eastside case. I never did get to talk to Gerald Brooke. Bolt did, though. I noticed Brooke pull him into a corner, looking real intent and asking him a lot of questions, while Bolt just smiled and blushed and shook his head. Not long after that, Bolt left for the long drive home. About midnight, the reception broke up, the

servants did a quick cleaning job and took off, all the houseguests started to yawn, and I went upstairs to bed.

Honest, Mother. That's all I did. I went to bed—in my own room, all by myself. I'd had a few drinks, maybe, but not all that many. Anyhow, I couldn't have been too drunk, because I woke up clean when I heard the boom.

It was a big, dull thud, and a man screaming like nothing I'd ever heard before, and then silence. Cripes, I thought—it's right below my window. I glanced at the clock, saw it was after two-thirty, grabbed my gun, and raced downstairs. Everything looked dark and empty, but the front door was slightly ajar, so I ran outside.

Someone had switched on the porch light, so it was dark but not utterly black. And there was Glen Crimmins, wearing jeans and a football jersey and looking as stiff and unsteady as a plywood statue. When he saw me, his eyes got huge, and he pointed wordlessly toward the platform. At first, I didn't notice anything wrong—just the big wooden platform, and the flags, and the folding chairs. And then I realized Crimmins was pointing not at the platform itself, but at something beneath it.

It's embarrassing, but the first thing that came to mind

was *The Wizard of Oz*. You know the scene I'm talking about. The tornado has just dropped Dorothy in Oz, and the Munchkins thank her for killing the Wicked Witch of the East. At first, she doesn't understand, and then she looks over to where her house has landed, and she sees two feet sticking out from underneath, the toes pointing straight up.

That's just what I saw—two feet sticking out from underneath, the toes pointing straight up. But these feet weren't wearing striped stockings and ruby slippers. They were wearing hand-sewn Italian loafers, so classy it was a shame to let them touch the floor. And it wasn't a farmhouse that had landed on top of Gerald Brooke. It was a big black thing, the artsy sculpture of the Liberty Bell; but now, down its front, almost from top to bottom, ran a long, jagged crack.

The next few hours were awful. The second I saw those feet and that bell, the thoughts started bumping around in my skull. If he was still alive, I had to get the bell off him and try to save him. If he was dead, it might be homicide, and I shouldn't disturb the evidence. If Crimmins had done it, I should take him into custody. But if he didn't confess right away, I'd be a sus-

pect myself, and I shouldn't do anything.

Then lights started going on inside the house, and people began running out—Mrs. Winchester, in a black lace negligée; then Dr. Lloyd, in slacks and a casual shirt; then Miss Penny, still in the pink dress. No one said a word. Everyone just stared—at the bell, at the feet, at each other, at me. And finally my instincts clicked into place. Whatever had happened, I was a police officer, and I had to take charge.

I barked out orders, and we all worked together to heave the bell off Brooke. When I saw his face, I knew he was dead, but I had Dr. Lloyd confirm it. Then I noticed something clutched in Brooke's left hand—a little black lacy thing, the ends of it fluttering in the breeze. I leaned down for a closer look and saw it was a pair of underpants. Someone behind me gasped, but I didn't know who, and at that point I hardly cared. I sent Mrs. Winchester to call the police, and when she got back, I told all four of them to sit down right on the lawn and keep their mouths shut. I had to protect the crime scene, and I had to keep them from destroying evidence or begging each other for alibis. Since Crimmins was the obvious suspect, I kept an especially close

watch on him, half expecting him to make a run for it. But he didn't budge. No one did. No one cried or got sick or gave me any arguments. I'll admit it felt spooky, Mother—sitting out there in the dark, the body just a few feet away, those pale, silent faces watching me while I watched them. I could practically feel them thinking.

The local cops arrived at last. I identified myself to the detective in charge, and he looked me over coldly before telling me to join the others in the living room. Then there was more waiting. Most of the cops were outside, securing the scene and tending to the body, but one big uniformed guy lounged in the doorway to the living room, his hand resting oh-so-casually on his holster, making sure we stayed put and kept quiet.

I strained to keep the sweat back, to convince myself I had no reason to worry. After all, I had no motive for killing Brooke. But I was afraid that my decision to move the bell would look bad, like I'd purposely made the others put their hands on it so my own fingerprints wouldn't seem so incriminating. Anyway, sitting there in my pajamas while all those other cops worked made me feel ridiculous and—well, and vulnerable.

Eventually, the detective walked into the living room,

silently beckoned to Mrs. Winchester, and led her into the kitchen. After half an hour or so, she came back, and a sergeant took Miss Penny into the kitchen. When she came back, Crimmins was led off, and after him, Dr. Lloyd. My turn's next, I thought bleakly. I'd hoped that someone would confess and spare me the embarrassment of being interrogated, but apparently that hadn't happened yet. Then the front door opened, and in walked Bolt.

I didn't know how he'd heard about the homicide or how he'd gotten back so fast, but I felt like kissing him. He waved at me, whispered to our guard, and disappeared into the kitchen. Before long, the sergeant brought Dr. Lloyd back and said the detective wanted to see me now.

He was sitting at the kitchen table, drinking coffee and chatting with Bolt. When he saw me, he stood up and shook my hand warmly.

"Sorry to keep you waiting so long, sir," he said. "I hadn't realized just who you were, but Sergeant Bolt here straightened me out. It's a privilege to meet you. And I've got to say we're lucky to have you right here on the scene. Maybe you two could help us out, talk to each of the suspects again. I don't mind saying I'm in over

my head on this one."

No easy solution, then, I thought dismally. No immediate, absolute freedom from suspicion. "So you didn't get a confession?" I asked.

He nodded without enthusiasm. "I got a confession, all right."

"You did?" I said eagerly. "That's great. I mean, quick work, detective. Who confessed?"

He sighed wearily. "Everyone did," he said.

"I did it," Mrs. Winchester said. "It was self-defense."

She was still in her black negligée, looking rumpled and exhausted but dignified nonetheless. I couldn't help thinking that it was her table I was sitting at, her coffee I was drinking, and I felt plenty uncomfortable questioning her. Bolt, sitting off to the side and quietly taking notes as he always does during interrogations, seemed perfectly at ease.

"I've already explained it to that other officer," she continued impatiently, "so I don't see why I have to go through it again, or why you have to question anyone else. No one else was involved. Only me."

"I just want to get the facts straight," I said soothingly. "You say Brooke tried to rape you?"

"That's right." She said it defiantly. "Right after the reception, I went straight to my bedroom. A little after two, that dreadful man knocked on my door, waking me from a sound sleep. He said Dr. Lloyd had gotten drunk, wandered onto the platform, and collapsed. Naturally, I wanted to keep such a disgraceful thing quiet, so I went outside with Mr. Brooke to help get Dr. Lloyd back to bed. When we got up on the platform, however, Dr. Lloyd was nowhere to be seen. It had all been a ruse to get me alone and helpless. Then that monster grabbed me." She dabbed at her eyes with a Kleenex.

That bastard, I thought. To try something like that, with the governor's widow. "Please go on," I urged.

She sniffed twice. "He knocked me down. I struggled fiercely, but he was too strong. And he tore off—well, what he had in his hand."

I stole a subtle look at the black lace underpants sealed up in the plastic evidence bag. "These are yours, then?"

"Yes. As you can see, they go with this negligée." She held out her arm and let me examine the lace on her sleeve. It was a perfect match, all right. "Well, that terrified me so much that I somehow found the strength to push him away, and he fell

off the platform to the ground. I heard him stirring and was afraid he'd come after me again. So I panicked, gave the Liberty Bell one good push, and ran away. I didn't even look to see where it had landed. I just ran to my room and wept. When I heard the commotion on the lawn, I ran outside, and it was only then that I realized I'd killed him. I never meant to. But I had to protect my honor."

"Of course you did," I said, full of sympathy. "Honor's just about the most important thing on earth to a lady like you, isn't it?"

She looked disconcerted. "It's very important, yes."

I felt lousy pressing her for details, but for her own sake I had to. Without more evidence that Brooke had in fact tried to rape her, she could face a murder charge. "Now, can anyone confirm anything you've told me? Did anyone see you with Brooke, maybe, or hear him telling you—"

"No," she cut in sharply. "No one heard or saw anything. So there's no point in bothering the others about it."

"Well, a doctor should definitely examine you for bruises and—"

"Absolutely not," she cut in again. "It would upset me too much, and it isn't necessary. I should think my word is

enough." She stood up grandly. "I'm going to take a shower and get dressed, and I shall advise my guests to do the same. If I find that you've annoyed any of them with more foolish questions, I shall be very angry indeed."

She stalked out of the kitchen. I didn't blame her for what she'd said. After all she'd been through, it was amazing that she was holding together at all. That's a strong woman, I thought, struck by the way she'd fought back when Brooke attacked her, by how even now she was fighting to spare her guests embarrassment. "It's remarkable," I said to Bolt, "what a woman like that will do when she's desperate. And she sure is a considerate hostess."

He grinned knowingly. "Very aptly put, sir. Saying she killed a man to keep us from questioning the others—how considerate can you get? But, as you say, she's desperate. I think your comment about honor really got to her. Well, do we talk to Penelope Marsh next, sir?"

I had been about to say that we didn't need to waste time on anyone else. But then I got the old, sick feeling. Somehow, something had slipped past me, and I'd better follow Bolt's lead, because he had a better sense than I of where I was headed.

"I did it," Miss Penny said. "It was temporary insanity."

Most of her makeup had worn away by now, and her pony tail had wilted. Otherwise, she still looked tidy and prim. She didn't look like anybody's kid sister any more, though—she looked like a middle-aged woman, which is of course what she is. It hadn't really occurred to me before. I mean, rationally I'd known that her show had been on for almost twenty years, that she had to be forty or better, but until that moment Miss Penny had seemed eternally young—like Mickey Mouse, almost, or Howdy Doodly.

"I don't know what came over me," she said. She sat up very straight, her hands folded in her lap. "Things simply happened. I can't explain it."

"Well, we'd like you to try, Miss Penny," I said gently. "You say Brooke came up to you at the reception?"

"Yes. He said he had an urgent matter to discuss, and he wanted me to meet him on the platform at two o'clock, after everyone else was asleep."

"I'm surprised you agreed to that," I remarked.

"Well, normally I wouldn't have. Goodness knows I never stay up that late. But he mentioned a—well, a name from my past, and that made me decide

I'd better talk to him. And then he was almost half an hour late. /So inconsiderate. As I always tell my Little Learners, it isn't thoughtful to be late. We shouldn't make others wait."

It was a poem, I realized. It sort of gave me the creeps, to have a suspect rhyming at me. "Can't argue with you there," I said. "So, he met you on the platform around two thirty. What did he say?"

"It's very embarrassing," she said, with a quick sigh. "But it's best to get unpleasant things over with—don't you think so, lieutenant? Take your medicine right away, and then you will be free to play." She sighed more deeply. "He wasn't a nice man. I've heard many people at Channel Seven say that he'd do anything for a television job, that he wanted to be a network anchorman or a talk show host some day. I suppose he was always looking for the big story that would be his ticket to television. And I suppose he decided I could give him that story."

She paused then, looking at the floor and shaking her head. I had to prompt her. "So he asked you for some information?"

"In a way." She bit her lip. "He'd stumbled across something from my past. A mistake I made years ago. I was in col-

lege, and the young man seemed so nice, and I was in love, and he'd said he wanted to marry me, and—well, I made a mistake. But Miss Penny isn't supposed to make mistakes. If people found out, it would mean no more *Little Learners' Land*, no more 'Just Say No Thank You' campaign. I wouldn't be able to help the children any more."

That bastard, I thought. To dredge up something as insignificant as that and try to use it against a sweet, public-spirited woman like Miss Penny. "So he threatened to expose you?" I asked.

"He said he would definitely expose me. But he said that if I told him all the details, he'd make the story as sympathetic as possible. If I didn't cooperate, he'd make me sound like a very naughty girl." Her shoulders started to tremble. "It was horrible. Just being reminded of my mistake was horrible. I'd loved that young man so much, and when he left me, I was so very, very sad. And Mr. Brooke was so mean to me."

She had paused again, putting her hand over her eyes. "So what happened?" I asked.

She took her hand away and looked at me blankly. "I hardly remember. He was smirking, and I was crying, and we started pushing, and he fell off the plat-

form, and I saw the bell, and I shoved it, and I ran away, and I saw that other nice young man, Glen. He was coming, and I was going. I think that's all. Everything kept going around and around."

"And what about the underpants, Miss Penny?" I asked.

"The what? Oh." She blushed deeply. "The unmentionables, you mean. I don't know. He had them in his pocket. Then he took them out. I don't know why. To embarrass me, probably. But they certainly aren't mine. All my unmentionables are white, and cotton, and quite, quite solid. I would never wear lace—there." She shuddered. "The point is, I know I did a bad thing, and I know I should be punished, but I don't think I should be punished very much, do you? After all, I didn't know what I was doing. And I'm so, so sorry. That's the most important thing, isn't it? Say you're sorry, loud and clear, and all will know that you're sincere."

Temporary insanity, she'd said. I didn't have any trouble believing the insanity part. I just hoped that it was temporary, that Brooke hadn't driven her over the edge and into a straitjacket for good. What a scumbag he was, I thought savagely. Well, he got what he deserved. As a cop, I disapprove of all homicides, but as a man

I hardly blamed Miss Penny for this one.

"She sure was sorry," I remarked to Bolt, "but for the life of me I don't know why."

"That's the crucial question, isn't it, sir?" he agreed. "Why was she so sorry? Was it because of something she did last night, or because of something she did long ago? It astonishes me, sir, to see how quickly you always focus on the most important point. Well, maybe Crimmins can help clear it up, since Miss Penny saw him coming while she was going."

Crimmins. I should have pressed her to say more about Crimmins, but that part of her statement had scarcely registered with me. Bolt, of course, never missed anything. "Right," I said hastily. "We'll see Crimmins next."

"I did it," Glen Crimmins said. "It was an accident."

He was shaking pretty bad. It was a shame to see a big, husky kid like that so pale and so scared. But I didn't let myself feel too sorry for him. After what I'd heard from Mrs. Winchester and Miss Penny, I wasn't going to buy just any confession he tried to sell me.

"So it started as a practical joke?" I said.

"Yes, sir." He swallowed hard. "That would make it manslaughter, wouldn't it, sir, and not murder? I wouldn't have to go to prison for a real long time, would I? And do you think I could still be a policeman someday? That's been my dream all my life. It means more to me than just about anything else."

"We'll see," I said. The poor kid, I thought. He must feel awful, trapped in a mess like this. "For now, just tell me how it happened."

"Yes, sir. Right after the reception, I went straight to bed—to my room, I mean. But I couldn't sleep. Too excited about the award. So I decided to go for a run and work off some energy. I got dressed and went outside. And there was Mr. Brooke, up on the platform. When he saw me, he laughed and called me over and asked if I could keep a secret. I think he'd had too much to drink, sir. He was acting awful silly and giddy."

"So what was this secret he was talking about?" I asked, thinking of Miss Penny's mistake.

Crimmins gulped. "It was underpants, sir. The ones he had in his hand later on. He said he'd sneaked into Mrs. Winchester's room during the reception and snatched them, and he thought it would be real

funny to run them up the flagpole or something during the ceremony tomorrow. He was trying to figure out the best way to do it. I couldn't believe it, lieutenant. A grown man—a famous reporter like Mr. Brooke—planning a stunt like that! I hated to think about how much it would embarrass Mrs. Winchester."

That bastard, I thought. Playing a dumb joke to humiliate his hostess in front of hundreds of people. "What did you do?" I asked.

"I tried to talk him out of it. But he had his heart set on playing a joke. So finally I said, forget the underpants. Let's do something bigger. Then he noticed the bell and decided it would be even funnier if we dumped it in the pool. People would run around looking for it in the morning, and when they found it they'd wonder how it got there, and how the hell to get it out." He blushed. "Sorry about the swear word, sir. I know that it's always wrong to curse, and that in front of elders it's even worse."

"That's all right. So you agreed to this?"

"Yes, sir. I figured it was better than the underpants, and it *did* sound funny. So we had to figure out how to do it. Moving the bell was no problem, since it was on that wheeled cart, but

first we had to get it off the platform. Mr. Brooke told me to get up there, pick up the bell, and lower it to the ground. He'd stand below to steady it. It seemed risky to me, but he insisted, and I thought we could manage it. I didn't realize how heavy that thing is."

"And then you dropped it on him?"

"No, sir." He shook his head vigorously. "I had a good grip on it. And then he grabbed it from below and yelled, 'I've got it. Let go.' Then his foot must've slipped. He was clowning around—he still had those darn underpants in his hand—and, like I said, he seemed drunk. Anyway, he slipped and fell flat on his back, and the bell came down on top of him. I tried to catch it but couldn't. I ran to the house to get help. That's when you came out, sir."

But he hadn't been running when I came out. He'd been standing frozen halfway between the platform and the house. I tapped my pencil against my chin. "Did you see Miss Penny while you were outside?"

He got two degrees paler. "No, sir. She wasn't anywhere around. She'd never have anything to do with a jerk like Mr. Brooke." He gasped, realizing what he had said. "Not that I disliked him, or ever wanted to

hurt him. It was an accident, and it was his idea, and I only went along with it because I didn't want to see Mrs. Winchester embarrassed. Honest, sir."

"Just trying to rescue a damsel in distress, were you?" I said. It sounded pretty plausible. "I can see you like to do good deeds. But you have to be careful, too, or you can land in a lot of trouble."

"You really put your finger on it that time, sir," Bolt said, as soon as Crimmins had gone. He sighed. "I wish I had your ability to understand people and their motives so quickly. Well, I'll try to do a better job of keeping up with you when we talk to Dr. Lloyd."

"I did it," Dr. Lloyd said. "And I'm not ashamed."

He didn't look ashamed. He looked excited, his eyes glowing and his thin, long face slightly flushed. Never before had I seen anyone so eager to confess. He whipped a pen and a little pad out of his back pants pocket.

"Mind if I take notes while we talk?" he asked.

That shook me up. I was used to taking notes during interrogations, but this was the first time a suspect had asked if he could take notes, too. Still, I

didn't know of any rules against it. "I guess it's okay. Did you want the notes for your lawyer, later on? You could have a lawyer with you now, you know."

"Oh, I don't need a lawyer," he said, scribbling away. "I know exactly what to say. Let's see. You'll want to know how it happened. Well, after the reception, I went up to my room, but I didn't go to bed. I wanted to write down what you had told me about the Eastside Strangler while it was still fresh in my mind. That's ironic, don't you think? I was taking notes on one of your recent cases, and now I'll be your next case."

"Pretty ironic," I admitted.

"Highly ironic," he said, smiling to himself as he wrote it down. "And when I finished my notes, I strolled over to the window, thinking about how I might use your insights. When I gazed into the yard below, mellow with the moonlight, I spied Gerald Brooke skulking about alone, like a worm in the night. And the fury welled up inside me. Why should he be able to enjoy this delicious night, to walk freely about the earth, when thanks to him worthier men were six feet under it? And suddenly it seemed to me that the platform was a pillory, and that this was the hour when Gerald Brooke should answer for his heartless acts."

I was nodding, starting to get into it. "What heartless acts?"

"Too many to number," he said, shaking his head. "For too long that viper has used his pen as a sword to lash the helpless. How often has he invited the public to feast on the private miseries of the unfortunate? And there was one man in particular—a patient of mine, and a dear, close friend." Dr. Lloyd put down his pen. "He was a homosexual, lieutenant, and he had AIDS. He'd told his family and was being completely responsible, taking care not to spread the disease. But he was a prominent man, and he didn't want the truth generally known. Somehow Brooke found out, and he made my friend front-page news. My friend lost his job. His wife, unable to bear the disgrace, left him. His children turned from him. Even then, Brooke wouldn't let him die in peace. He kept up the snide remarks in his columns, until finally my friend bought a gun and took his own life."

I remembered the case. It had been a sad, ugly business. "So you went outside to confront Brooke?" I asked.

"Yes," he said, picking up his pen again. "At first, I intended only to chastise him for doing such deadly damage. But the man was completely unrepentant. When I described my

friend's awful anguish, he laughed. He snickered. He chortled. Yes, that's it." He wrote it down. "And he said I was to be his next victim. He took a pair of black lace underpants from his pocket and waved them in front of me, vowing to say that he'd seen me wearing them, to denounce me in his column as a homosexual and claim that my clinic is a brothel, a breeding ground for the disease I'm trying to defeat."

That bastard, I thought. To attack a dedicated, upright man like Dr. Lloyd, and to try to destroy a clinic that was doing such important work. "I can see how much that upset you," I said. "You still look a little sick."

He sat up straighter. "I'm fine—just a little tired, since I got no sleep." He started taking notes again. "But my spirit needs no sleep. It is soaring, invigorated by the knowledge that I've rid the world of a venomous villain. I took him by the lapels and lifted him in the air, letting him dangle there for a moment, begging for the mercy he'd denied his victims. And then I cast him to the ground. I spied the Liberty Bell and decided there could be no fitter way to dispose of this wart on the face of democracy, this defiler of the sacred freedoms of the press. So, with a mighty effort, my

muscles bulging, I pushed the bell off the platform, and it landed on top of him with a great plop." He frowned. "It landed with a great plunk. Anyway, it landed. I felt no pity, no remorse. Slowly, I walked back to the house. I intended to spend a last few moments in contemplation and then give myself up to you. But you, ever alert, had heard the bell fall. So I surrender to you now." He put down his pen and held his hands out proudly. "Go ahead. Slap the cuffs on me."

Did he think I went to bed with handcuffs tucked in my pajamas pocket? "That's all right, doctor," I said. "I trust you. Why don't you go rest in your room? I have some matters to discuss with my sergeant."

He looked disappointed. "I *did* do it," he said, and wandered off.

I scratched my head and tried to figure it out. I had four pretty good confessions and no idea of which one to pick. Well, Miss Penny seemed fogged over, and Glen Crimmins was just a kid. They might be unstable enough to imagine things or make stuff up. And, come to think of it, Mrs. Winchester's story sounded fishy. Would Brooke have tried to rape her the night before she was giving him a citizenship award? And why hadn't she screamed for help? So it looked

like Dr. Lloyd was my man. Still, he seemed so gentle that I couldn't quite see him as a murderer.

Cautiously, I turned to Bolt. He was humming to himself and fussing over his notes. He may already know, I thought. He usually does. I worded my question carefully, not wanting to sound like a fool. "What did you think of Dr. Lloyd?" I asked. "Of his character, I mean?"

"His character?" For a moment, Bolt looked taken aback. "Oh, I see. Well, sir, I'm afraid I didn't find his character very convincing. He was trying for a tragic hero, I suppose. Gothic, I guess you'd call it. But the style wasn't consistent, he mixed his metaphors, and he alliterated too much. No wonder he's had a hard time getting his novels published."

His novels? What did his novels have to do with it? I thought of his two hundred rejections and wondered if Bolt thought professional jealousy was the real motive. "Brooke was a successful writer," I ventured.

"Successful enough," Bolt agreed. "His murder's going to make the national news. So I guess we have to give Dr. Lloyd credit for ingenuity. From what I hear, anything a celebrity writes can get published nowadays. If Dr. Lloyd had made himself a celebrity by getting

convicted of Brooke's murder, the publishers would fight over his memoirs—and maybe over his novels, too. It's almost a shame we can't arrest him, isn't it, sir?"

"Almost," I said weakly. At least now I knew what Bolt was talking about. And I could imagine how desperate a writer might get after all those rejections, how he might do almost anything to break into print. But to confess to a murder he didn't do and risk spending the rest of his life in prison? "He sure has a lot of guts," I said.

"Oh, yes, sir," Bolt said gravely. "I can't think of anything that takes more guts. To know that death is coming, and yet still keep working, planning, hoping—remarkable." He shook his head sadly. "By the way, sir, I thought you handled that part very discreetly, just making the one inquiry about his health and then backing off when he didn't want to discuss it. Do you suppose he caught it from his friend, the one who committed suicide?"

So that was it. I remembered that Dr. Lloyd had said this novel would be his last attempt, and thought of how tired and thin he looked. He had AIDS. Now it made sense. He might have a year or so left, maybe only a few months—anyway, not a long time to spend in

prison. Why not gamble everything for a last chance at his lifelong dream? "I don't know," I said numbly.

Bolt looked abashed. "You're right, sir. I'm sorry. We shouldn't speculate about how he caught it. That's violating his privacy—the sort of thing Brooke did." He grimaced in distaste. "But I don't see how we can protect Mrs. Winchester's privacy, or Glen Crimmins'. Those underpants may be irrelevant, but they were found in Brooke's hand. We'll have to account for them somehow. Well, she was asking for trouble. A seventeen-year-old boy! Really, she should have had more restraint."

It was impossible. "You don't think she gave them to Glen Crimmins, do you?" I asked incredulously.

"Oh, I doubt it. She'd be too afraid of scandal. I imagine he just took them afterwards, when she wasn't looking. Very improper, of course, but you can hardly blame him for wanting a memento. After all, it might have been his first time." Bolt smiled dreamily, as if remembering his own first time. "And it was almost certainly his first time with a governor's widow."

"Almost certainly," I agreed, and held my head in my hands. Mrs. Winchester and Glen Crimmins? Sure, he was a good-

looking kid, and she was reasonably glamorous. But he was so young, and her husband had been dead just six months. I felt stunned. "Her speech," I managed. "The foundation. The awards. She said she's devoting her life to his memory."

He patted me on the shoulder. "You're very compassionate, sir. Yes, the speech makes everything worse. Imagine how she felt when she saw her underpants in Brooke's hand! It's no wonder she made up the attempted rape story. Anything would be better than admitting the truth. As you said, honor's about the most important thing on earth to a lady like her."

Now, I regretted the words. "It must have sounded sarcastic."

"A little," Bolt said, shrugging. "But she deserved it. She was obstructing justice, after all, trying to stop the investigation before we questioned Crimmins too closely. She probably figured she couldn't trust a kid like that. Well, his story *was* even more ludicrous than hers. Who could possibly believe it? And it was a real giveaway when he identified the underpants as Mrs. Winchester's, wasn't it? Dr. Lloyd and Miss Penny didn't know they were hers, so how did he? And he was too quick to say he'd gone straight to his room after

the reception. Of course, Mrs. Winchester made the same mistake, so she can't really blame him for sounding defensive. She underestimated him if she thought he'd break down and admit everything."

"Everything?" I looked up eagerly, no longer caring if Bolt saw through me or not. I had to know. "Everything including the murder?"

Bolt pursed his lips. "That's an interesting possibility, sir. It hadn't occurred to me, but, as always, you're right. She *may* have thought Crimmins did it. After all, he'd hardly run back to her room to tell her that Brooke got the underpants. How do you suppose it happened? Do you think Brooke suspected something and was waiting for Crimmins to leave Mrs. Winchester's room? Or do you think they just happened to meet in the hall when Brooke was on his way to see Miss Penny?"

I was lost again. "It's anybody's guess," I said helplessly.

"True enough, sir. We may never know. And Crimmins may never tell us whether he simply dropped the underpants, or whether Brooke teased and flattered him until he started boasting and took them out. And then Brooke could have grabbed them. Either way, I guess it took Crimmins a little while to realize what a man like

Brooke would do with evidence that the governor's widow had slept with a high school student. And then Crimmins must have gone after Brooke, to beg him not to expose Mrs. Winchester in his column."

I thought of how Crimmins dived into the river to save those kids, not even taking his shoes off first. I thought of how passionate he'd gotten about stopping drug dealers, how much he wanted to be a cop. Yes, I decided. He's an impulsive, good-hearted kid. He would have run out after Brooke, determined to salvage Mrs. Winchester's reputation. But Brooke, intent on publishing a big story, wouldn't listen. And Crimmins got angry. And that, I finally realized, must be how it had happened. "Crimmins wanted to rescue a damsel in distress," I said, remembering my earlier words. No wonder Bolt had thought them profound.

He looked confused but nodded gamely. "Eventually," he agreed. "And she's quite a damsel, isn't she? Part mother, part sweetheart—older and wiser, but always young. The appeal must be overwhelming for boys like Crimmins and your son, who grew up watching her show, daydreaming about marrying her, wishing every teacher could be like her. And memorizing

her rhymes. Did it make you shiver, sir, when he recited that verse about swearing? He seems almost brainwashed, doesn't he? It's no wonder he lied to protect her."

Miss Penny. He had to be talking about Miss Penny, not Mrs. Winchester. So Crimmins lied to protect Miss Penny. Mrs. Winchester lied to protect her reputation. Dr. Lloyd lied to get his books published. "But why did Miss Penny lie?" I asked, utterly baffled.

Bolt's head jerked back. "*Did* she lie, sir? I'd thought she more or less told us the truth."

As it turned out, more or less the truth was exactly what Miss Penny had told us. She hadn't told us the full truth about Crimmins, but only because she hadn't realized that he'd seen her knock Brooke off the platform and push the bell on top of him. She hadn't realized that Crimmins, overcome by pity, would confess to manslaughter to save his childhood idol from a murder charge.

And she hadn't realized that I'd misinterpret what she said about the mistake she made in college. I felt terrible when we had to arrest her, less terrible when we searched Brooke's desk and found the photocopy of the article she'd burned after grab-

bing it from his pocket, leaving him with nothing but an irrelevant pair of underpants in his hands. Maybe she'd slept with her college boyfriend, and maybe she hadn't. The article was fuzzy about that. It was very clear, however, about how he'd disappeared and never been seen again after telling friends he was breaking off his engagement to Miss Penny. And then there were her parents, who died in an unexplained house fire after telling their teenaged daughter she was too young to bleach her hair. And her first producer, who fell from a fifteenth story window after suggesting she add a co-host. And one of her sponsors, killed in a hit-and-run accident the day after complaining about her ratings. And two or three others. She's in a mental hospital now, amusing staff and patients alike with her cheerful rhymes about the importance of mental health. Dr. Lloyd is writing her biography and has already received a six-figure advance from a major publisher. He got a big advance for his own memoirs, too, once he decided to go public about having AIDS.

Gerald Brooke got his citizenship award posthumously. I got mine through the mail. It was an anticlimax, but all things considered, I couldn't blame Mrs.

Winchester for canceling the ceremony. Bolt was the one who brought me the award—he usually ends up distributing the mail, since no one else likes to do it—and he spent a solid ten minutes congratulating me.

"You certainly deserve it, sir," he said, pumping my hand. "And I guess Brooke deserved his, too. He picked on some harmless people, but he sure was right about the union corruption. And about Miss Penny. I guess if you dig around enough, you're bound to hit real dirt once in a while." He chuckled. "He got some crazy ideas, though. Do you know what he said to me when he took me aside at that reception? He said he'd noticed that I'd worked with you on all your big cases. And he actually suggested that I'd solved them for you, that most of the time you didn't know what you were doing and relied on me to tell you what was going on. Can you believe anyone would be stupid enough to believe that?"

I couldn't stand it. This is it, I decided. This time, I tell him straight out. "Bolt," I said, "it's true. You were the one who solved the Hodges murder, the Cripner murder, the Brooke murder, the Eastside Strangler case—all of them. Every time we've worked together, you figured things out first. All those

killers would still be free if it weren't for you."

Bolt laughed out loud. "Oh, that's funny, sir. I thought Mrs. Winchester and Glen Crimmins and Dr. Lloyd were pretty transparent. But that's definitely the most ridiculous confession I've ever heard."

So you see, Mother, Bolt just wouldn't believe me when I told him the truth. And maybe you won't believe me now, but I swear I never went to bed with Mrs. Winchester. She leaked that story to the press only because she had no choice. Once the reporters found out that Brooke had died with her underpants in his hand, once the rumors about bed-hopping at the Winchester estate had surfaced, she had to admit to something. No one would have believed a complete denial, and she didn't have a lot of options. She could say she'd seduced a seventeen-year-old boy. She could say she'd slept with a doctor who had AIDS. Is it so surprising that she preferred to drop hints about having an affair with me instead?

Anyway, Ellen understands. Like I said, she's always a good sport. She thinks it's funny, in fact, and says maybe it'll even help my career, by making the commissioner think I have friends in high places. Well, I don't know about that. All I

know is that it's been pretty darn embarrassing, and having my own mother doubt me hasn't made it any easier. Don't you know me better than that?

Ellen sends her love and says she hopes you'll be able to come for a visit soon. I hope so, too. Frankly, things have been a little tense around here lately. Kevin still hasn't forgiven me for arresting Miss Penny. If you could come and put in a good word for me, it might help.

Your loving son,
Walt

really. But a mother hears things, and she wonders, and she starts to worry. Now I won't worry any more.

Yes, I think I can get a week free for a visit late next month, and I'll talk some sense into Kevin then. While I'm there, why don't you invite Sergeant Bolt over for dinner? I've heard so much about him that I'm curious to meet him.

By the way, I don't think you've ever told me whether Sergeant Bolt is married. You might just mention it, the next time you write to

Dear Walt,
I never doubted you. Not

Your loving
Mother

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UNSOLVED

by
Lawrence Treat

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the June issue.

Thomas Langton, one of the great potters of the last century, made seven teapots considered to be his masterpieces, and then broke the mold.

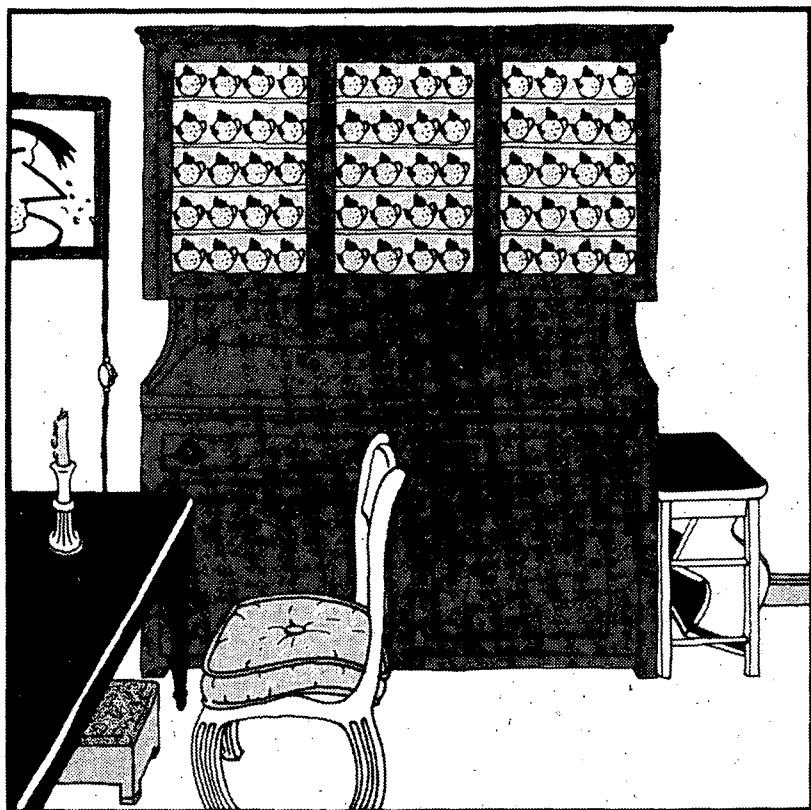
Of the seven, he kept one for himself and gave the others to friends and family. Three of the seven are known to have been damaged or destroyed, and three more have been irretrievably lost. The seventh is in the collection of Lily Pewshon. Like the teapot, Lily is priceless.

Since she used the teapot frequently, no company would insure it except at an outrageous premium, which she refused to pay. Instead, to safeguard the Langton teapot, she had fifty-nine copies made in plastic, on the theory that no thief could possibly pick out the original from all the imitations, unless he had a few hours' time. And even then—

Terry Winkle was a thin, undernourished little man, an illegal alien (he was French) who had a hard time earning money legitimately. Having heard of the Langton teapot, and having an interest in ceramics, he decided to swipe the pot and hold it for ransom.

He had no trouble sneaking into Lily's house and hiding overnight, and at six A.M., when it grew light he went into the dining room and saw what you see. However, Lily was an early riser and he could hear her upstairs.

If you were Terry, could you spot the original Langton pot?



QUESTIONS

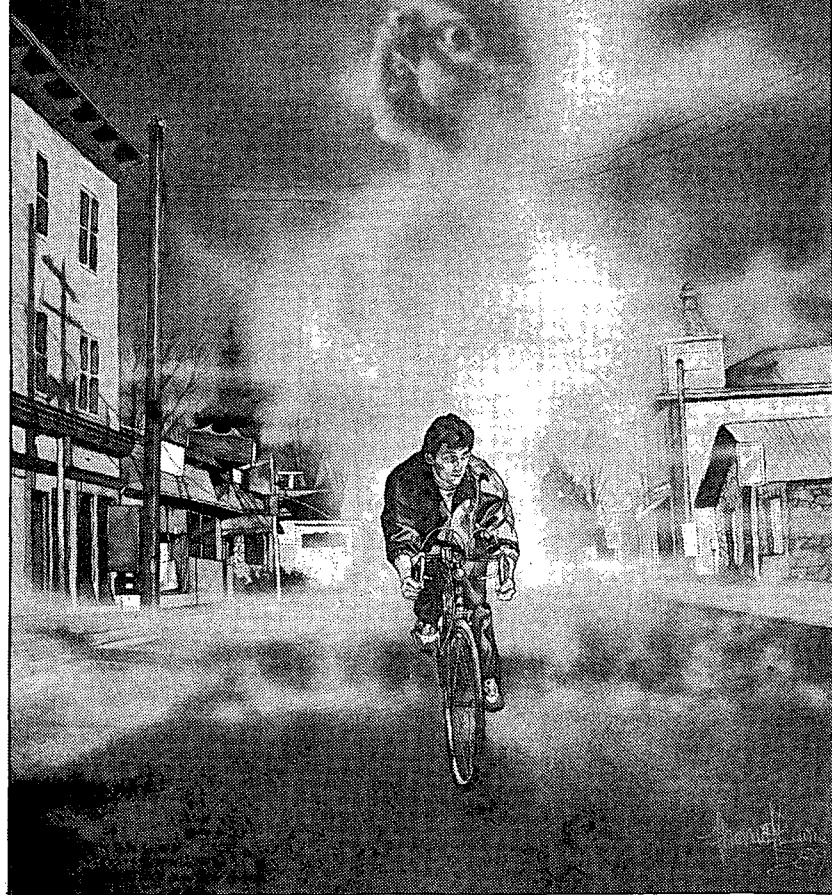
1. Did Terry have time to examine all three cabinets?
2. Was Lily tall or short?
3. Which of the three cabinets should Terry open?
4. On which shelf should Terry start looking?
5. Do you think that Terry found the genuine teapot?

See page 149 for the solution to the April puzzle.

FICTION

The Cyclist

by Michael Beres



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Illustration by Thomas Fleming

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ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Because of the fog he could not see much, just a few yards of fading pavement, his front wheel, and his knuckles whitened by their grip on the dropped handlebars. He had ridden ten miles, according to his odometer, and he felt a pleasant, moist warmth beneath his nylon windbreaker. Though it was October, the humidity and lack of wind made the fifty degree temperature seem mild. Behind him the bicycle chain clattered contentedly on the freewheel. Felt good to be alone and riding free.

He had left early while the streets were still empty, while the houses were still darkened in peaceful Saturday morning slumber. The banks and shopping centers and post offices would not open for at least two hours. Until then he could ride his bicycle without apprehension, without that constant concern that cars, carrying their passengers on tedious weekend errands, might slink up behind him and, because of the fog, force him onto the gravel shoulder.

The fog was like death, the way he imagined death would be, at least at first. People who had come back from apparent clinical death on operating tables or in emergency rooms had spoken of a tunnel-like experience. They had fallen into a tunnel or shaft and then been drawn back like yo-yos, never quite experiencing the other side. Fog was like that, like death, peaceful.

Last week in the funeral home his mother had looked so peaceful. Everyone said she looked peaceful. Aunt Ginger, his mother's oldest sister, kept staring at the coffin saying, "I just don't know. If she opened her eyes and sat up and called me over to give her a hug, I wouldn't be a bit surprised." Uncle Harley, his mother's kid brother, said, "Sis has the same look on her face as when we were kids playin' hide-and-seek." Aunt Becky, his mother's twin, said, "It looks like she's smirking at me. She always said she'd be the first to go." His mother's siblings all agreed that she looked peaceful. And they all cried, seeking out his comfort. An only child, their only blood tie to his mother. They hugged and squeezed him and cried upon his shoulders, upon his chest. There had been no one else to cry upon at the funeral. Before he was a year old, his father had been killed by a falling I-beam at a construction site. He hadn't seen his aunts and uncles in years. He'd probably never see them again. Life so much like fog. Can't keep track of everyone, of everything.

As he rode he could feel the fog on his exposed skin. Legs, hands, and face felt as though they had been layered with wet washcloths. When he was a boy his mother had lowered his fever with wet

washcloths. When he was a boy his mother had always taken great care to protect his health. "You need to get a good start in life," she had always said. "If there is one thing I can give you, I want it to be good health." And she had done that, many times making him eat what little meat she could afford. He remembered once throwing several slices of molding bread into the kitchen garbage and later seeing his mother retrieve it, separate the moldy corners, and stuff the bread into her mouth before supper. Her appetite ruined so he would have enough meat and vegetables. Her system accumulating cholesterol so that one day fragments would dislodge from the carotid artery, starving her brain of life, so that one day the son who benefited from her sacrifices would be in superior health when he attended her funeral.

A sound behind him, tires hissing on the misty pavement. He pushed off the dropped bars, braced himself on the brake hoods, and saw, in the mini-mirror mounted to his glasses, two headlights behind him, yellow eyes in the fog. The eyes moved out across the center line and a car passed him slowly. In the passenger seat a woman older than his mother stared up at him and smiled.

Before the car disappeared into the fog ahead, he stood on the pedals and accelerated. If he could keep up with the car he would be certain not to run into parked cars or cars pulling out without seeing him. He sat back on the seat, shifted to a higher gear, braced himself on the dropped bars, and raced ahead, following the red taillights home at thirty miles an hour.

Home was not a house any more. He had sold the house after his mother's first stroke, the one that put her in the nursing home where she lived a newborn's life for a year before her death. Home was a neighborhood on the south side of the city, the neighborhood where he grew up. The hide-and-seek neighborhood. The trick-or-treat neighborhood. His old paper route neighborhood.

The car ahead turned onto the entrance ramp of the expressway that led downtown. He slowed down to twenty, crossed the overpass, and coasted into the old neighborhood alone.

He rode slowly, watching shadows emerge from the fog like the edges of a vast unfinished puzzle. The rounded shapes were trees, the straight and pointy shapes the roofs of houses. The tree shapes were larger, the trees much taller and fuller than when he was a boy. The trees made up the neighborhood's namesake, all of the north-south streets named for these trees which loomed above rooftops like wizened ancestors. He turned down Maple, still a mailbox

on the corner, a red, white, and blue one. When he was a boy the mailbox had been olive drab and he used to sit astride it, pretending it was an army tank.

Before turning down Maple he had passed his old house on the opposite side of the street. He had not looked at the old house. Selling it while his mother was in the nursing home had had such finality. And with his mother's death memories of living in the old house had also died.

So why had he come on this ride? Was it an attempt to finally erase all those damn boyhood memories? Everything in the old neighborhood so perfect, a grand old time with Chuck and Jerry and Tom and Ralph. His boyhood in memory such a contrast to his present, his apartment ten miles west of here, his job wedding him to the computer through the terminal that stared at him unblinking day after day. Married to a job instead of a woman. Whatever could have happened to Eloise and Jane, the two girls of the neighborhood who wandered in and out of his boyhood? Sometimes like sisters, sometimes like sirens. Jane's house somewhere here on Maple in the middle of the block. A kiss on her front porch in the dark, the porch light going on, him running through yards, leaping over hedges, vaulting fences, long-jumping Mr. Dominic's goldfish pond.

A bachelor. An eligible bachelor becoming less and less eligible as the years of isolation built up that wall of eccentricity which is politely called "interesting" when he sometimes overhears himself being spoken of. Caring for his mother had been a convenient excuse for avoiding social situations. Now the excuse was gone. Already, this past week, a buxom girl named Faith had entered his office at work and suggested with a slight raising of her eyebrows and weight-shifting toss of her hip that "life must go on." Faith was after him and he no longer had his mother to defend him.

He sped up, turned off Maple onto Madison—the presidents bisected the trees—then south again on Oak. Familiar turns, his old paper route. Oak was dark, the trees tunneling the street, masking the light from the fog sky. Something ahead, metal-to-metal, a tapping. As he rode he expected to pass someone working on his car in the street, but the sound stayed ahead of him. Not an echo of it, not too far away, just ahead, about once every second.

He rode faster. The metal-to-metal sound continued, but there was another sound, a kind of dull thud every few seconds. The

sound of his bicycle—chain whispering on the sprockets—was overwhelmed by the tapping and the thuds that sounded like something being thrown.

A paperboy! He should have known! He was following a paperboy down the street. The thuds were folded papers hitting sidewalks and porches. And that metal-to-metal sound was a pedal crank slapping a kickstand. Just like his old paper route bicycle, damn kickstand always slipping down, pedal slapping it and sending a jolt through his ankle, a quarter-inch notch gouged in the kickstand. He pedaled faster, and when he did the slap of the kickstand quickened and grew louder, so loud he could feel it.

Something behind him, something kind of buzzing, like maybe someone chasing him but he couldn't see behind because of the fog. Reminded him of bicycle hide-and-seek games, Jerry on his English racer that ticked like a wristwatch when he glided. Always rode with Jerry when they played hide-and-seek. If they played tonight he'd have to tape up this idiot kickstand so it wouldn't give him away.

Pretty cold the way the fog wet his hair and all. If he pedaled faster he'd keep warm. If he pedaled faster he'd get away from whoever was following him. How come every time there was fog he was such a dumb scaredy-cat?

He delivered the last few papers on Oak and rode back to Walnut. Walnut was all gone on the left, all torn down for the new downtown expressway. Ten customers wiped out and he wondered where they'd gone.

The buzzing sound behind him was gone now, but he still had goosebumps. He finished up the right side of Walnut, emptied the basket, and headed home. At the corner the cement posts for the new overpass looked, in the fog, like giant tombstones.

At home Mom made hot chocolate. When he drank it he shivered again, felt like the fog was inside him. Mom hugged him then. And, instead of being a jerk and saying, "Aw, Mom," he hugged her right back. Maybe it was her warmth, the way she got rid of his chills, or maybe he *had* been scared out in the fog. Anyway, he felt like hugging her for a long, long time.

The lights of squad cars and two ambulances flashed into the fog. Some of the squad cars were on the overpass, some on the expressway below. A policeman spoke to a man outside a large

delivery van parked at the bottom of the overpass. The man wiped his eyes and nose repeatedly with a handkerchief. When the policeman walked away, the man sat on the running board of the delivery van and sobbed.

The policeman walked down the weeded embankment, stopped near a group of other policemen and ambulance attendants who stood near a blanket draped over something on the ground. The policeman looked at the blanket, then at a bicycle that lay mangled beneath the underpass.

"Truck driver's pretty shook up," said the policeman. "Couldn't see him in the fog. Clipped his head with the side mirror and threw him over the railing." He looked toward one of the ambulance attendants. "Any I.D. on the body?"

"No," said the attendant. "Probably lives around here."

"How old was he?"

"Hard to tell."

"That bad?"

"Yeah. I don't think even his mother'd recognize him."

The policeman shaded his eyes and looked up to where the sun was beginning to burn through the fog. "All right. Let's get the hell out of here before we tie up traffic even more." He clapped his hands. "All these folks got to get to the bank, keep the economy moving."

High up on the embankment a paperboy who had been making his morning rounds stood with his bicycle leaning against the chain-link fence and stared wide-eyed as the ambulance attendants filled a body bag. The boy's fingers were clenched, white-knuckled, about the links of the fence as if he would never let go.

FICTION

Summer Notes

by
Karen
Parker

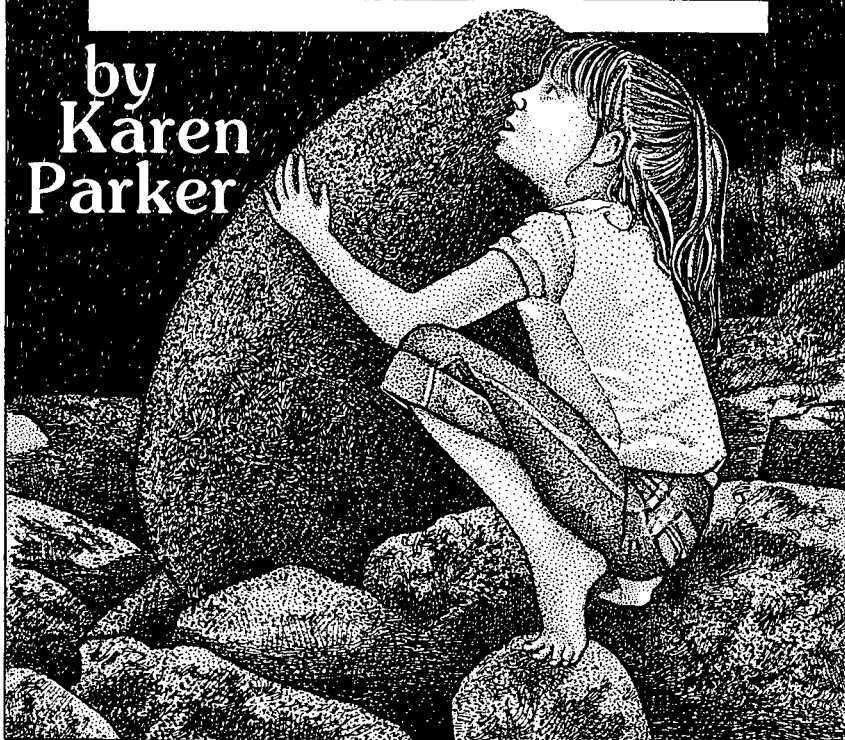


Illustration by Kurt Wallace

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They were sitting on the screened porch in the late afternoon, the old man and the child. She was crosslegged on the day bed, eating graham crackers spread with honey, and she brushed crumbs from her shorts and T-shirt onto the sandy blanket. Her grandfather was moving gently in a large rocking chair. It drove well.

Somewhere along the row of cottages a screened door slammed, then slammed again. Must be the Metcalf twins, Emily thought. The door on this cottage had lost its coiled spring so it didn't close on its own. You had to bang it shut. She wished her dad had noticed this when he rented the cottage and asked that it be fixed.

Emily licked her fingers. Her granddad didn't mind if she ate before supper. She was glad her mother had gone to the beach for the afternoon. She hoped her granddad decided to stay with them when they went home at the end of the summer.

He didn't shave his whiskers every day like her dad did. His face was bristly, then clean for a day, then bristly. Emily looked at him admiringly. He felt her look, glanced at her, smiled. They got on well together.

A sigh of contentment over the snack came out of her as she drew her knees up under her chin. She put her cheek on her knees. Granddad continued to rock slowly.

A group of boys were throwing a ball over a cottage a street away. Their cry of "Eeeny-eeny-ei-nor, here the ball comes over" drifted lazily across the heat.

Emily rubbed her cheek across her knees. "What's a suicide?" she asked.

"Hmmm?" asked Granddad, drowsily.

"Suicide. What is it?"

"When you kill yourself."

"Oh, I thought so."

He squinted one eye at her. "Why did you want to know?"

Emily ran her fingers along a scratch on her leg. It was forming a ridge.

"I just wondered. I heard some people talking and they said there'd have to be a suicide."

Her grandfather rocked and thought for a moment.

"You must have misunderstood. You don't do a suicide. You do a murder. I mean—a suicide is self-directed. You must have heard wrong."

"No," said Emily. "That's what they said."

"Who?"

"The people."

One thing he had learned in life. Patience. "What people?" he asked and the lack of irritation in his voice encouraged her to explain.

"I was sitting under the dock—" she glanced at him but he didn't look alarmed—"and two people walked out to the water and the man said it would have to be a suicide and the lady said, 'I agree,' and then they walked back and didn't say anything until they were on land and she said, 'You'll have to arrange it,' and he said, 'I know.' And then they were gone."

Chet stopped rocking. He looked at his granddaughter and she looked back. He'd gotten to know her pretty well these past weeks—before that he'd only seen her once or twice a year. She was bright for eight years old. He took her seriously.

"Did they see you?" he asked.

"No. I was underneath. You have to crawl on the bank—don't tell Mom—and sort of squeeze through by some rocks. But it's nice. Like a cave."

"Could you see them?"

"No."

"Well, that settles that," Chet said. He went back to rocking. Emily checked between her toes for sand.

"I know who they are," she said.

He stopped rocking again. "How?"

"I seen them"—"saw," he corrected—"saw," she said, "them a few times in the store buying soda pops. I recognized her voice—she's real pretty—she hisses when she talks."

"Hisses?"

"She says—um—"Thiss is the way to drink from a sssstraw."

"Oh." He went back to rocking.

The late afternoon air was hot and stale. One of the locals, the man who delivered blocks for those still using ice boxes, said the daily doldrums happened because all the land breeze had blown out to sea and there was a lapse before it began to blow back.

"You feeling okay, Dad?" Alice asked at supper.

"Sure," he said. "Why?"

"You seem quiet."

"Just thinking, I guess. I like this newfangled meal—what did you call them, open-faced sandwiches?"

Alice grinned at Bert, who was eating a bit reluctantly. He liked his supper to be hot and hearty.

"I'm glad you like them. If I'm going to be a beach bunny all afternoon, I have to make a quick meal. No fussing."

"I offered to buy fish and chips on the way home," Bert grumbled goodnaturedly.

"Too greasy. All that oil I put on my body made me not want to eat anything cooked in it."

"Oh, Mom, that's awful," said Emily. She made a face.

After supper her grandfather suggested a walk. The cicadas were still shrilling. They walked along the narrow dusty road between the rows of cottages. There was a breeze now; it smelled damp and fishy but not unpleasant.

"I wish it was always light at night," she told him. "I like going to bed before it's dark."

"Are you afraid of the dark?" he wanted to know.

"Sort of."

"Well, one night we'll make friends with it. Then you'll never be frightened again," he told her.

"Really?" she asked.

"Uh-hum." He stopped in front of the store. "Want to share a popsicle?"

"Sure."

They had a bit of a discussion over what flavor. Emily did not want chocolate. Her gramps wasn't partial to orange. They settled on root beer.

"Are those people here?" he asked casually when they were standing at the cash register.

"Nope," she said, knowing who he meant. She was anxious in case the popsicle broke unevenly and they'd only have part on the stick and the rest in their fingers. It melted so fast and her hands got sticky. But the popsicle broke neatly and evenly. "You're a popsicle expert," she told the storekeeper when he had smacked it on the counter and divided it exactly in half. "Thank you," he said.

The next day they went to the store twice—once in the morning, once in the afternoon. The couple was not there.

Emily's mother did not go to the beach that day, so Emily did not have an afternoon snack. When the cottage got hot from supper preparations—"If I boil water this place heats up," her mother complained again and again—Emily and her gramps went outside and sat on the fallen tree at the end of the street. They could see the harbor from there. And two little boys were on a stoop nearby blowing bubbles.

"I wish you could poke bubbles and they wouldn't break," she

commented and then in the same tone of voice, matter-of-factly, she said, "That's them," and slightly inclined her head toward a passing car with a couple inside.

Part of Chet's mind marveled that she was so discreet, even at eight years of age. She knew darned well he had gone by the store twice to see if they were there. She knew he was curious and interested. He would have expected her to shout and point. Alice, as a child, would have done so.

The rest of his mind was in amazed shock. The man in the car was the owner of the large inn at the center of this holiday town. The woman was his receptionist. He knew the wife of the innkeeper when he saw her. Pleasant. Middle-aged. Mother of two sons. A suitable companion for her middle-aged husband. The receptionist was a bit of a floozy, Chet thought. And likely half his age.

Chet didn't sleep very well that night. He kept thinking of the words "have to be a suicide." The remonstrances, "Don't be a fool," "It's none of your business," and "She likely heard wrong," helped. But not for long.

Somewhere near dawn he made a decision and then he slept soundly.

At breakfast it was his turn to work the ancient toaster with the flip-down sides.

"It's going to be another scorcher," Bert announced. He said this every morning and it always was.

"Don't forget I like my toast dark on one side and light on the other," Emily reminded her gramps.

"What are you going to do when we go home and you have to put up with the pop-up toaster again?"

Emily shrugged. It was silly trying to figure out things ahead of time. How could she know *now* how she would feel *then*?

"The perils of progress," murmured Chet.

"Well, let's do the groceries early," Alice said. "You coming, Dad?"

"Nope—I think I'll stay," he answered. "I intend to just relax and read," he added quickly as Emily looked over at him and he was afraid she would want to stay with him.

When they had gone he got Alice's rubber gloves from under the sink. They felt wet inside. He didn't know how she could stand to wear them. He liked the feel of soapy water on his hands.

Then he shut himself in his room with a newspaper, an old jar of mucilage he'd seen in a cupboard, the scissors. Already it was

hot in the room, but he did not push the flowered chintz that acted as curtains back on the string that doubled as a curtain rod. He left them closed.

He leaned back against the wall and peered out the crack between the curtains and the window. He could only see a few feet of the cottage next door.

Then, when he'd put stuff out on the bed and sat down on the rickety chair beside it, Mrs. Ambrose next door called out something to one of her kids, and Chet jumped guiltily. "Just not cut out for this sort of thing," he told himself as he got to work.

An hour or so later he had two letters written in words cut from the newspaper and pasted onto plain white paper.

The first one said, "The only suicide to happen had better be yours."

In block letters he addressed an envelope to the innkeeper at the inn. It felt weird to write with rubber gloves on.

He'd debated a bit before making the second letter, but he went ahead. It said, "Someone is out to hurt you. Take care. A friend." He addressed it to the innkeeper's wife at their home address.

He used water to put the stamps on the envelopes, feeling over-cautious.

Then he put the glue and gloves and scissors back and ripped the cut pages of the newspaper into shreds which he flushed down the toilet.

With a quick glance up and down the street to make sure Alice and Bert weren't on their way home, he went around the cottage and across to the next road by the back route. Several streets away he located a mailbox and dropped the envelopes inside.

"Well, that's that," he said to himself.

A day later Chet and Emily were on their way to the beach. "Do you want to see if those people are in the store?" she asked him.

"No, I don't need to. I took care of it," he told her.

"Oh," she said and looked at him but did not ask anything more.

The next day Chet saw the receptionist in the laundromat. She looked tired. Chet wondered if something was bothering her sleep. He thought he should feel pleased, but he didn't. He felt empty. But somehow satisfied.

On the weekend Bert added to the lunchtime conversation by commenting, "Saw a police car in front of the innkeeper's house today."

"Wonder why?" Alice asked. "I hope the boys are okay." The

eldest boy worked in the local drugstore and was friendly and helpful.

"Maybe a problem at the inn," Bert said.

"Likely that," Chet agreed.

The rest of the summer passed uneventfully. Emily crawled several times under the dock, but she didn't hear any more interesting conversations.

Chet decided he could put up with his daughter's family—and they with him—so he started to make plans to close down his apartment and move in with them when they went back to town.

The day before they left the cottage for the summer, Alice heard in the post office that the innkeeper's wife was getting a divorce.

Emily was sitting on the worn linoleum sorting through her summer collection of shells and stones, trying to select the ones that would fit into the single box her mother had agreed she could take home.

She stopped her activity, looked up at her granddad. "There won't have to be one now, will there?" she asked.

He knew what she meant. "No," he told her. "Not now."

FICTION

A Matter of Brazilian Import

by Erich Obermayr

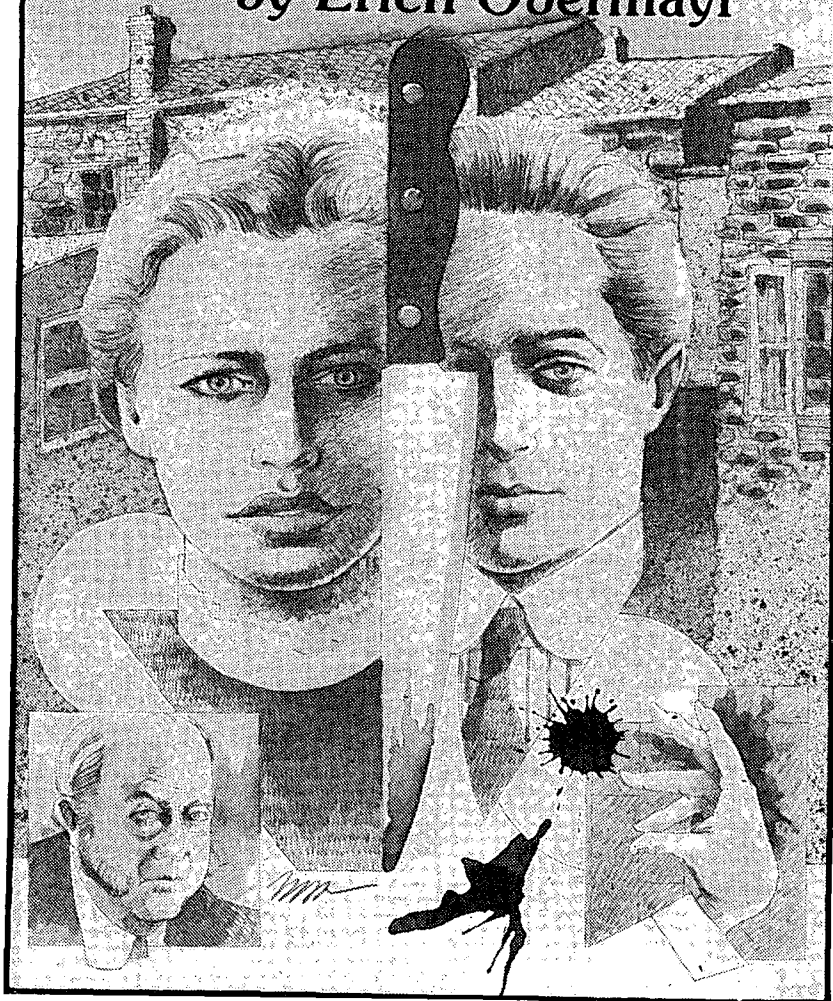


Illustration by George Thompson

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The appearance of Auguste Longnon and the young man at his side was a surprise to Paul Aichele. No one in Paris was further from his thoughts that evening, when he answered the insistent knocking at the door. He and Longnon were veterans of the Commune, and they had faced death together more than once during the spring of 1871. But they had seen little of one another in the nineteen years since. Their occasional encounters were, for the most part, accidental, and consisted of simple inquiries about each other's health.

Aichele welcomed the two, nevertheless. He had long since realized that the awkwardness he and Longnon felt in one another's company existed because they were survivors of a lost cause. They had no victories to celebrate, or triumphant stories to retell. The camaraderie and concern they once shared still existed; it had merely become inexpressible as their concentration turned to the difficult task of restoring their lives to normal.

But these thoughts changed quickly to curiosity as Aichele showed the two men into his apartment, and saw how very disturbed they were. Longnon sat immediately at the edge of a chair, his back bent forward,

the fingertips of his roughened hands pressed together. The young man with him was in too agitated a state to bring himself to sit down.

"I take it this is not a social call, Auguste," Aichele said.

"No," Longnon answered, "it is not." He ran the fingers of one hand through his greying hair, the gesture obscuring whatever emotions he felt at seeing his old comrade again. "Do you remember Captain Bouchard?"

"Of course," said Aichele.

"He saved us all."

Aichele nodded, his memory taking him back to a warm afternoon in May, the sun's rays angling downward through the clouds of powder smoke, and Captain Bouchard leading a handful of men up and over their shattered barricade. It was a suicidal attack, but it diverted the *Versaillese* long enough to allow himself, Longnon, and many others to escape what had been a hopeless situation. Then, looking again at the young man, Aichele realized why his features had seemed so familiar.

"This is Emile Bouchard, the captain's son," said Longnon.

Aichele had the inescapable impression that he was meeting a living memory, and he extended his hand eagerly. But the gesture was cut short. In-

stead of returning the handshake, the young man took a darting step forward and abruptly set a small cloth bundle on the coffee table. As he did, it seemed to unwrap of its own accord, revealing a blood-stained kitchen knife.

Aichele sat down, made himself comfortable, and prepared to listen.

"Since the Commune, and since the captain's death," said Longnon, "I have done my best to look after his widow and their young son."

"And their young son is now a young man who finds himself in a great deal of trouble," said Aichele as he straightened the blood-spotted cloth, which turned out to be a linen pillowcase.

"But I've done nothing wrong!" Emile said. "I'm not even suspected. It's Camille they'll suspect. We came to you because you're a detective, and you will know what to do to help us."

"An ex-detective, officially at least," corrected Aichele. "And just what is it you think I can do?"

"You can make sure nothing happens to Camille!"

"Camille Roland is Emile's fiancée," said Longnon. "She works as a maid for the De Metz family."

"She began three months ago,"

continued Emile, "and from the day she started, M. De Metz made one vulgar advance toward her after another. I had to put a stop to it."

"And did you?" asked Aichele, eyeing the knife.

"It's not what you think, M. Aichele. It's true M. De Metz was stabbed, and with this knife, but not by me or by Camille."

"But he is dead."

"Yes," answered Emile. He drew a deep, trembling breath, as he searched for a beginning to the story. "Yesterday—Friday—Camille found out M. De Metz planned to release the household staff for the weekend. Everyone but herself, that is. And since his wife is now traveling in Italy, it was clear enough that his real intention was to have Camille alone with him in the house. He always spends Saturdays in his office, so we planned to confront him when he came home this afternoon and let him know in no uncertain terms that his behavior was not going to be tolerated. I was to wait in Camille's room while she served his afternoon tea, then she would come for me and we would face him together. But when the time came, the footsteps I heard in the hallway were those of a man, not Camille. I was sure it was De Metz, and you can see how I could not let him find me

there in Camille's room under those circumstances."

"Yes," said Aichele.

"I hid in the closet."

"And did he find you?"

"No. But it wasn't De Metz who came into the room, it couldn't have been. Whoever it was walked straight to the closet, but instead of looking inside, he opened the door just wide enough to drop this knife in at my feet. Then he was gone."

"Could you see him?"

"No. I didn't dare look. I waited a few minutes to make certain he had left the room, and just as I opened the closet door I heard Camille scream. She had taken M. De Metz his tea, in the study, and found him dead."

"Stabbed," said Aichele.

"Yes. We didn't know what to do. Camille wanted to call for the police immediately, but I saw how incriminating it would be, with me there and the knife on the floor of her closet."

"So you decided to dispose of it."

Emile bowed his head, his eyes to the floor. "I should have stayed with her," he said. "But she insisted that I go. She said she'd done nothing wrong, and had nothing to fear. But my being there would have been impossible to explain innocently. I took the knife, and

went to M. Longnon. I planned to throw it away somewhere on the street, but I couldn't—it seemed like everyone was watching me. M. Longnon insisted we come to you."

"Which is fortunate," said Aichele, "because you wrapped the knife in one of Camille's pillowcases, or at least I assume those are her initials."

Emile's eyes widened as he looked down at the pillowcase, a bright blue *CR* embroidered in script along the hem.

"And murder weapons do have a way of turning up," said Aichele. "But that is beside the point, *n'est-ce pas*? Someone did finally notify the police?"

"Camille was to wait half an hour after I left, then go to the neighbors and send for the police. M. Longnon and I came straight here, so they can't have been at the house long."

"They will charge Camille, won't they?" said Longnon.

"I'm afraid they do tend to arrest the most convenient suspects first," said Aichele.

"Then you must do something," declared Emile, his anxiety turning his plea into an order.

Aichele found himself exchanging looks with Longnon, whose eyes carried the same request, but with much weight from the past on their side.

"Yes," acknowledged Ai-

chele, "I must do something." He took the knife in his hand, turned it over a few times to examine it, and set it back down. "But there is nothing more for the two of you to do. Give me the address of the De Metz house, and I will contact you when there is something to report."

"I don't know how to thank you enough," Emile said. His voice trailed off as he looked uneasily down at the knife.

"Let us hope you will have something to thank me for," Aichele answered. "And you can leave that with me."

It was dark when Aichele reached the De Metz house on Rue de Montyon, a moderately well-to-do street just north of the Boulevard de Poissonière. He was not displeased to notice the coach belonging to Inspector Leroux among the three police vehicles parked along the curb. Leroux was never pleasant to deal with, under any circumstances, but at least his habits were familiar and his mind predictable.

Partway up the walk Aichele stepped aside for two burly *gendarmes* escorting a petite and very distraught young woman between them. They helped her into the prison wagon, closed the door behind her, and sent it clattering away down the

cobblestone street. At the front door, Aichele passed the officer on guard by announcing himself in an authoritative voice and adding, "I'm here at the request of Inspector Leroux."

The De Metz house was sufficient for a family of means, but neither extravagant nor especially large. The rooms Aichele made his way through reflected a choice of quality over quantity. Finely crafted and finished woodwork ran along the bottoms of the walls and around the windows and doors. The uncrowded furnishings consisted of chairs, polished tables, a few richly upholstered sofas, and, here and there, a modest piece of antique sculpture.

He found Leroux in the study standing over the corpse, which lay covered by a mortician's sheet on the floor.

"Good evening, Leroux," Aichele said as he walked up beside the inspector.

Leroux reacted with a start to the unexpected sound of Aichele's voice. But he quickly composed a resentful look, and said, "What are you doing here?"

"I've come to assist in your investigation."

"I don't need any assistance, and if I did, Paul Aichele would be the last man in Paris I would ask."

"Which is precisely why I

find it necessary to come of my own accord."

"And you can now leave of your own accord."

"Come, now, inspector. I understand your position, but let me remind you that on three occasions since my 'retirement' I have intervened to save you the embarrassment of prosecuting the wrong person, not to mention delivering the guilty parties into your hands."

"That is not relevant here," Leroux said, nervously scratching the upper edge of his thick, brown beard, pushing the flesh of his cheek rapidly upward and down. "This case, no matter how you may have found out about it, is perfectly in hand."

"The young woman I saw being led away—a murderess?"

"Yes," said Leroux, his hostility softened by his attempt at sounding supremely confident. "And there is much work to do—I will have someone show you out."

Just then a uniformed officer entered the study from the open door at one end of the room. He saw Aichele but took his presence for granted and said to Leroux, "Still no sign of the weapon, sir. We've searched the other servants' rooms and the kitchen as well."

"Then search them again," Leroux snapped. The officer saw he had committed a serious in-

discretion, and retreated quickly from the study.

"A case perfectly in hand?" said Aichele. "Except you have no murder weapon."

"We will find it eventually."

"I'm sure. But in the meantime could you allow me a few minutes to look around? There can't be any harm in that."

Aichele bent down to the body and pulled back the sheet. Leroux did nothing to stop him, but Aichele could feel the indignant stare at his back.

"I know you would prefer taking me by the arm and leading me out the door," said Aichele, without looking up. "But your better judgment will not let you. I strongly recommend that you continue heeding your better judgment." He heard Leroux shifting his weight uneasily from one foot to the other, then he turned his attention to the body.

De Metz was a stocky man, slightly taller than average. The first few buttons of his shirt had already been unfastened, the material folded back, and the area around the center of his chest wiped clean. The wound was a small, lens-shaped hole which looked deceptively like a ruby-colored pendant lying against De Metz's white skin. The upper point went cleanly into the center of his chest, while a shallow cut, which

did not penetrate the breastbone, led downward a few centimeters from the lower end.

"No other marks on the body?" Aichele asked.

"See for yourself."

Aichele sighed quietly and pulled the sheet from the rest of the body. There were no other wounds.

"The heart was obviously pierced," Leroux began lecturing. "The blow was struck from below, with an upward motion of the knife, as the cut leading into the lower part of the wound shows." He paused for emphasis, then added, "That means he was stabbed by someone much shorter than he was."

Aichele let the statement pass. As he looked around the room he could see nothing out of place. The Persian rug in the center of the floor was unwrinkled, a large bookcase that partitioned off part of the room was undisturbed, and the chair at the writing desk was centered perfectly, its high back parallel to the desk's edge.

There was a folder on the desk containing a sheaf of typewritten business correspondence. "I see De Metz was a partner in an import firm," said Aichele as he thumbed through the papers.

"The partner is a M. Flandrin," Leroux said. "We have already sent a man to his resi-

dence. He left the city yesterday for a weekend at Calais. His driver and butler both saw him personally to the train."

"Which rules him out as a suspect," mumbled Aichele, his attention on a piece of paper he had separated from the others. "What do you make of this note, the handwritten one?"

Leroux looked at the paper over Aichele's shoulder. "Some kind of reminder to himself."

Aichele read the note aloud:

1-ask Flandrin why S. S. San Miguel diverted from Belém to Bahia

2-inform M. Vieira that we will have no dealings whatsoever with him, under any circumstances.

"Who is this Vieira?" Aichele asked.

"Some Spaniard, I suppose," said Leroux.

"No. The name is Portuguese."

"Whatever. He's someone De Metz decided not to do business with. Nothing unusual about that."

"Any plans to question him?"

"There's no need to, or to question any of the twenty or so others mentioned in those letters. The maid admits she was here alone with De Metz when he was killed. The doors and windows were all closed

and locked from the inside, and there is no indication anywhere that anyone forced his way in."

"But you don't have the weapon."

"We will have it eventually."

"Unless she used a kitchen knife, and washed it off and put it back in a drawer when she was through."

It was impossible for Leroux to tell if Aichele was serious. He glanced involuntarily toward the kitchen.

"And what about these?" asked Aichele. There were drops of dried blood on the floor, looking like a wavering line of little pockmarks in the finish, leading from the body out through the doorway and into the hall beyond.

"I'm glad you noticed," Leroux said with a clear note of finality. "They lead straight to the closet in the maid's room."

Aichele was examining the spots closely, especially a small, crescent-shaped smudge, and another exactly like it, though fainter, closer to the door. "Beautiful," he said, as he straightened up.

"What?" Leroux asked quickly.

"The floor. It's such a beautiful color. I wonder what sort of wood it is?"

The floor had darkened from years of wear yet the wood still had a warm, rust-colored un-

dertone, which would have been more pronounced in the daylight but was still quite noticeable in the light from the gas lamps along the wall.

"Something De Metz imported," said Leroux. "The firm's specialty is tropical hardwoods."

"From Brazil?" Aichele said.

"I suppose so. That would be the tropics."

Aichele smiled. "And where is the maid's room?"

"At the end of the hall, last door on the left."

Aichele walked ahead, stopping once to look at a faint smear of blood high on the wall of the hallway. The spots on the floor became fewer, and the distance between them greater, except in front of each of the first three doors where they appeared in clusters.

"What are the other rooms?" Aichele asked as they approached the maid's door.

"Servants' quarters. None of them are here, De Metz sent them away for the weekend."

"And his wife is in Italy," Aichele added and then, mindful of Leroux's surprised look, quickly opened the door.

The furnishings were simple. There was a small bed along one wall under a window. On the opposite side was a dressing table and a wooden chair. The third wall was taken up almost

completely by the double doors of the closet and the elaborately beveled and moulded trim surrounding them. Aichele opened one of the doors. A few hangers, holding plain, practical looking women's clothing were revealed.

"Why couldn't the killer have come and gone through that window?" Aichele said, turning toward Leroux from the closet doorway.

Leroux silently walked to the bed, reached across it, and parted the curtain to reveal a securely fastened latch. "Like I told you, the entire house was locked." He let the curtain drop back into place.

Aichele closed the door firmly behind him, and they walked back toward the study.

"If I were to convince you that the maid could not possibly be the killer," said Aichele, "you would undoubtedly ransack the house looking for evidence against whatever new suspect you could think of, not to mention alerting the entire city to the fact that a murderer was loose on the streets. So, unhappily for Mlle. Roland, I'm afraid I must refrain for the moment from speaking in her defense."

Leroux bristled. "You think you know who the killer is?"

"I have some ideas worth exploring. What I want you to do, after you finish, of course, is to

be prepared to return here, alone, and at a moment's notice. I will contact you through the Préfecture when the time comes."

Leroux gave a reluctant consent with a slight nod of his head.

"Then I won't be keeping you any longer, inspector. Good evening."

The night air along Rue de Montyon was refreshing. It was not yet eight o'clock, and Aichele felt quite at ease taking the time to walk, his overcoat unbuttoned, to the corner of the Rue du Faubourg Montmartre for a cab. The case had gotten an early start on the evening, he noted with some satisfaction. There was still plenty of time to properly arrange the small scavenger hunt he would be leading Leroux on later that night, providing all went well.

The traffic in the streets moved briskly, and after a brief stop at the Ministère de la Marine, where he was fortunate enough to find a clerk still on duty, it took only a few minutes more for Aichele to arrive at the apartment of Mrs. Poll, the Englishwoman who was his part-time housekeeper. His appearance there was nothing unusual. The two of them often found it enjoyable to add an evening's socializing

to their otherwise professional relationship.

"I'm here to ask your help, Mrs. Poll," Aichele said, coming straight to the point. "What I need to employ, specifically, is your experience on the English stage."

"Oh, that," she said with a laugh.

"You underestimate your talent. Remember, I've seen the notices in your scrapbook."

"On the contrary, inspector. It's just that I'm amused when I think of my career as an actress. I thoroughly enjoyed it and, as you say, I did manage to squeeze more than my fair share of applause from a few minor roles."

"I have more than a minor role in mind," said Aichele.

"Yes? Center stage?"

"After a fashion. I'm at work on a case which requires two additional players for what I hope will be its resolution. One is male, younger than I, perhaps by as much as ten years. On the other hand, he looks much older than his age due to the perfectly useless and dissolute life he has led. His female companion is a coarse, outspoken Englishwoman. She is employed as a cook's helper in the De Metz household, which was the scene this afternoon of the brutal murder of M. De Metz. Shortly, this couple will begin making the rounds of cer-

tain cafés and taverns catering to foreigners. First stop will be Taverne O Globo, not far from here on Rue des Anglais. It is run by a South American expatriate, an honest enough fellow, though as a rule the same cannot be said for his clientele. He keeps a pot of black beans simmering on the stove, serves them with rice, in the Brazilian style. Our couple will, I hope, encounter there a particular foreigner, if he has the goodness to behave as most strangers do when they find themselves alone in a strange city."

The night had taken on a penetrating chill when the Englishwoman and her companion, whose most distinguishing feature was the opaque paleness of his skin, walked slowly along the Rue des Anglais toward the Taverne O Globo. By day this street swarmed with activity. There were peddlers of every kind, shoppers picking and choosing among them, and knots of students from the Sorbonne or the École Polytechnique, whose animated arguments easily lasted the entire length of the short street. But with darkness it became a clammy little canyon, passed over by the bright night life of Paris, the day's trash piled at intervals in sodden heaps along the curb.

O Globo's faded sign—a grid-
ded globe painted on a warped

wooden panel—hung from the wall above the entryway. The two figures passed through the darkened doorway and ascended the flight of stairs that led to a door opening directly into the tavern. O Globo was not full, but the billows of tobacco smoke swirling just beneath the low ceiling and the loudness of what customers there were made it seem busy enough. Most of the space was taken up by a clutter of empty tables and chairs, pushed haphazardly aside by the patrons as they made their way to the more preferred places along the poorly lit margins of the room.

Had anyone bothered to look closely, they might have thought it strange that the couple stood for so long surveying a scene filled with unoccupied tables. But they finally did pick one, and both of them walked toward it with the same excessive caution, the obvious result of too much drink.

Their table was alongside one occupied by a deeply tanned, blond-headed man, whose exceptional height was apparent even as he sat. He had just finished his meal, and wiped his mouth with a noticeably polite dabbing of his napkin. He was alone, and could not help being distracted by the couple's clumsy arrival.

The woman caught the waiter's attention with a wave of

her hand, calling for *cognac* in such heavily accented French that, even though the room was filled with loud, foreign sounding voices, her words easily rose above them. The pale man, meanwhile, took to slowly tipping backward in his chair, at times bumping the tall man's table. When their drinks arrived, the woman downed hers in several quick swallows, and ordered another as the waiter left.

"Well, drink up, dearie," she said. The alcohol made her flushed and alert, while it left her companion drawn and sluggish.

He stared down at his glass.

"Maybe it'll give your courage a bit of a boost."

"It's not courage that's lacking," he said. "I've got plenty of that."

"Oh? Then what is lacking? What does it take to knock out a window, walk into an empty house, and walk out with old man De Metz's five thousand francs?"

"Not so loud," he said, checking to see if anyone had heard, in every direction except behind him, where the tall man sat well within hearing. "And I'm done arguing. Breaking in is too dangerous, and that's the end of it."

"Dangerous? Pitch a brick through the window, and we're gone with the money in five

minutes. Where's the danger?"

"The danger is if we're caught it's prison for me, and this time they won't go lightly."

"And who's to catch us? The streets are empty and the neighbors are asleep, and if they're awake they won't pay the slightest attention."

The pale man responded with grim silence.

"You're throwing away five thousand francs," she said, not caring that her exasperated voice now projected well out into the room.

The tall man joined them then, quickly and gracefully, without asking permission or introducing himself. He simply left his table and took one of the seats at theirs.

"I could not help overhearing," he said, with an accent of his own, but not an English one. "And I think I can be of some help to you." His voice was deep and confident, and his expression was friendly, except that his grey eyes, which stood out against his tanned skin, lacked the smallest trace of emotion.

"You expect to break into a house without rousing a soul," said the pale man, making a snarling noise at the English-woman, "but you can't even talk about it without letting the whole damn world know." Then he said to the tall man, "We won't be needing your help, or

anybody's else's. And it's time we were leaving."

The woman, however, did not make the slightest move to leave. "You mentioned a house belonging to someone named De Metz?" the tall man said, commanding attention with his voice even though he spoke quietly. Neither of the two responded, but the answer was plain from their silence.

"And you were talking about breaking into this house?"

The man and woman looked at one another.

"It's a simple matter, if done properly. And I say that from experience."

"And of course you know how to do it properly," the pale man said, still trying to dismiss him.

But the woman was clearly intrigued. "I work in the kitchen at the De Metz house," she began to explain, despite her companion's reproachful looks. "They've got quite the little fortune between them. The old man's got an import business, or at least he had one until today, and she's from a rich family anyway. Well, late this afternoon I ran into my friend Monique, she's at the Babicks', they're next door. She's kitchen help, just like me."

"Get to the point," interrupted the pale man. "If you're going to tell it, tell it. No one cares about Monique."

The woman glared at him, then continued. "She told me the most terrible thing had happened. She said M. De Metz had been murdered. So I went as quickly as I could to see for myself, and it was true, they hauled the old man out right there in front of me. The thing is, he was alone in the house with the maid. His wife's off in Italy and he gave the rest of us staff people the weekend free." She lowered her voice to a whisper and slid her chair closer to the table. "And the maid's the one that killed him, so the police have her taken care of. That means now, as we speak, the house is empty. I stayed until the police left, so I know it for a fact. I also happen to know M. De Metz kept five thousand francs there in the house, secret from anybody else. He showed it to me once. He called it his 'amusement fund.' Trying to impress me, he was, and I must say it worked." She looked back and forth between the two men. "The money's there now, ripe for the picking."

"Where in the house is the money kept?" the tall man said.

"Oh, you're a clever one, aren't you," she answered, smiling slyly. "You'll find out when the time comes."

The tall man chuckled in his deep voice, and smiled back at the woman as if they had just

shared a private joke.

"She's not even sure it's there," said the pale man. "And now she wants three of us stumbling around in the dark, smashing windows."

"That won't be necessary," said the tall man. "It happens that my business is making very quiet and very profitable visits to places like the De Metz residence."

"Of course," the other sneered. "For five thousand francs it becomes everybody's business."

"I can get you into the house quietly."

"And what would you want in return?" the woman asked.

"Three thousand francs."

"Absurd," the pale man said.

A patronizing smile formed on the tall man's lips. His eyes narrowed slightly, but never lost their cold neutrality. "If I were you," he said, "I would be less concerned with what I was losing, and more concerned with the two thousand francs I stood to gain."

"He's absolutely right," agreed the woman.

"You guarantee we can get into the house quietly?" The pale man still sounded skeptical, but it was clear that he had no choice but to accept, too.

"I guarantee it."

"Well then," the woman announced, "what are we waiting for?"

"I'll need some time," the tall man said. "Have a coach waiting on St. Germain, at the Pont Sully, in one hour." He smiled the same smile down at them again as he stood to leave, then walked slowly away.

It had grown even colder by the time the three stepped from their cab on the Rue du Faubourg Montmartre. They waited, shivering, until the coach was several blocks away, then moved quickly from the corner down the deserted Rue de Montyon. The two and three story buildings lining the street formed a pair of high, dark walls, interrupted only by a narrow street on one side and a small, park-like area of landscaped grounds on the other. Among the trees and shrubs, and set well back from the street, were three private homes. The center one was the De Metz residence.

After checking the street in both directions, the three stole hurriedly up the walkway to the front door.

"Open it," the pale man demanded, looking nervously in all directions.

"Wait over there." The tall man motioned toward the first of a row of evergreens growing alongside the house.

"Trade secrets," the Englishwoman said lightly, and led the

pale man away. They were only a few steps onto the lawn, however, when they heard the latch click and the door swing open. They rejoined the tall man inside, and he closed the door quietly behind them.

"And now the money," he said.

"In the study," the Englishwoman answered. "It's hidden amongst the books."

The tall man lit a small candle, set in a shielded candle holder which allowed just enough light to escape for them to see their way.

"This is it," the woman said, after they had passed through several rooms and stood at the study door.

The tall man handed the light to her. "Hold it high," he ordered, and opened the door.

They were almost to the center of the room when, from the shadows along the far wall, a voice very firmly said, "Don't move."

"I assume that is you, Leroux," said the pale man.

A small black dot floated toward them in the flickering candlelight. Then the form of a man took shape behind it, and the dot became the end of the gunbarrel of Leroux's revolver.

"We could do with a bit more light," the pale man said and, making a point of moving slowly and openly, lit one of the gas

lamps. The fuller light revealed Inspector Leroux standing alongside the writing table, looking perplexed at hearing Aichele's voice, but not seeing him.

"It really is me," said the pale man.

"Aichele?"

"Yes." Aichele abandoned the pale man's nervous and somewhat intimidated mannerisms. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped most of the pale color from his face, and removed the heavy eyebrows which had lowered his forehead considerably. "Allow me to present Mrs. Poll, whom you may or may not know from the English theater as Rose Moore. Mrs. Poll, this is Inspector Leroux of the Paris police."

"Pleased to meet you," said Mrs. Poll.

"The feeling is mutual," replied Leroux.

"And this is Manoel Vieira, the wayward son of one of Lisbon's better families. You might remember him as H. Leblanc, which was his alias during his days as a Parisian criminal."

"Can't say as I do," said Leroux.

"Not surprising," said Aichele. "His was a short and undistinguished career. H. Leblanc dealt behind the scenes in stolen property, and when we began arresting his favorite

suppliers, he found it expedient to leave the city, although no charges were ever brought against him. Rumor had it he went as far as Brazil, and that seems to have been exactly the case."

"Inspector," Vieira said, his voice untroubled, "I have no idea what this man is talking about, and there is certainly no need for the gun." He made a short, waving motion with one hand, dismissing the pistol in a good-natured way.

Leroux glanced at Aichele, who had no objection to his returning the pistol to its holster.

"It is true that my name is Manoel Vieira, and I did arrive from Brazil just this Thursday. I am an export agent and my firm is based there. I am in Paris to do business with M. De Metz and his partner, M. Flandrin. I have never heard of this H. Leblanc before in my life, and I am here tonight only because these two said M. De Metz wished to see me."

"At this hour?" said Leroux.

"I don't question people's work habits, or their choice of associates, for that matter, especially people like M. De Metz, who happens to be one of my best customers. And if someone could be so kind as to fetch M. De Metz, he can vouch for me, and we can all go on about our business."

"M. De Metz is dead," Leroux said. "Someone murdered him earlier tonight."

"What?" said Vieira, allowing his whole body to recoil with shock. "Well, I'm very sorry to hear that, but it does make my being brought here, not to mention this man's disguise, rather pointless."

"We will come to the point soon, M. Vieira," said Aichele, content to let Vieira's explanations stand unchallenged for the time being. "Inspector Leroux, we have the matter of your current suspect to discuss."

"All right," responded Leroux, unenthusiastically.

"I think we can assume the attack on De Metz came as a surprise, since there was no evidence of a struggle in the room, nor were there signs that he had attempted to defend himself—no cuts on his hands or arms, no tears in his clothing. So we ask ourselves, how does one surprise and kill a man in his own study? Of course, first we gain entry into the house, quietly and unnoticed. Then we conceal ourselves in an advantageous spot, behind this bookcase, for example, and await our opportunity. The victim comes into the room expecting his afternoon tea, among other things. Perhaps he is impatient, and begins pacing. He

passes the bookcase and we seize him from behind, one arm around his neck, and jerk a knife into his chest. Our hold on his throat stifles any cries, we pull the knife out, and lower the corpse quietly to the floor.

"Next, imagine Mlle. Roland assaulting De Metz as I have described. An unlikely feat for a woman her size, though by no means an impossible one. She could have surprised him, she could have held him with one arm, and she could even have driven the knife through his breastbone on the first try. But she could not have done so and inflicted the wound at an upward angle. Because she is so much shorter than De Metz, Mlle. Roland would have to stretch upward to reach around his shoulders, then stab downward. However, if we imagine an attacker who is a good head taller than De Metz, someone the height of M. Vieira here, then the slightly upward angle becomes the most natural and forceful one for a quick, short thrust—as opposed to a wide swinging blow, which might have given De Metz time, even in his shock and surprise, to raise his arms."

Leroux shrugged. "That is a fascinating bit of speculation."

"And I resent his insinuations," Vieira said, sounding offended.

Aichele walked to the spot where the body had lain. "And then there is this bloody trail which leads straight to Mlle. Roland's room. But did you notice these two slightly curved smudges, Leroux, one here and one a bit farther on?"

"No," said Leroux, coming forward to see the marks for himself.

"They were made by the toe of the killer's shoe, which had inadvertently touched the pool of blood alongside the body. What they show us is the length of the killer's stride." Aichele lined his right foot up with the first mark, then took a step with his left, and another with his right. His toe touched the floor a full foot-length short of the second smudge. "As you can see, the killer's stride is longer than mine, an unusual trait for a young woman."

Aichele continued on through the doorway and into the hall. Vieira followed, in front of Leroux and Mrs. Poll, apparently unconcerned with the fact that Leroux had begun watching him closely.

Aichele lit the two lamps in the hallway. As he adjusted the second one, he asked Leroux, "Why do you suppose there are clusters of blood spots on the floor at each of these three doorways, but not in front of the maid's door?"

"For some reason," ventured Leroux, "the killer slowed down or stopped at those three doors, which meant more blood dripped from the weapon at those points."

"A good thought," said Aichele, "but I find it unlikely that so much blood could drip from one knife, even one as bloody as ours must have been. I rather think the killer dipped a piece of cloth, or a handkerchief, in blood and then squeezed it steadily onto the floor. And I cannot think of a single reason for Mlle. Roland to do that, can you?"

"No," admitted Leroux.

"But it would make perfect sense if someone were manufacturing the trail in order to lead your investigation to the maid's room. And if that person were unfamiliar with the house—but had been told Mlle. Roland's room was one of these four—he would need to stop briefly at each door in order to look inside. Since he would see nothing in the first three rooms to indicate he had found the maid's room, he could enter the last one without hesitation."

Aichele left Leroux thinking and walked on. When the others followed, he slowed until they were close and then, just when Vieira came within reach, he gave him a slight push, causing him to lose his balance and

extend a hand to catch himself against the wall.

"You will notice," said Aichele, "M. Vieira's hand touched the wall at almost the exact height of a small smear of blood, left there on the wall by the killer, who also apparently lost his balance here."

Vieira instantly snatched his hand back to his side. "Inspector Leroux, you may not be aware of what this man is trying to do with his cheap vaudeville tricks, but I am, and I have no intention of enduring a moment more of it."

"But, monsieur, we are almost to the end of the trail," Aichele said, his mock sincerity goading the tall man. "Please indulge me for a few minutes more." He opened the door to the maid's room. "Mrs. Poll, would you please light the lamp on the dressing table. And, Leroux, open the closet doors and stand in the doorway, facing us. M. Vieira, please stay close, as I am sure this will interest you."

Light from the lamp filled the room. Leroux hesitated, then did as Aichele had told him.

"Since the trail of blood leads to the very spot where you are standing, Leroux, it is only natural that you expected to find the murder weapon there," said Aichele.

"But we didn't find it here, or anywhere else."

Vieira stared in silent surprise at Leroux, then hid his reaction with an awkward cough.

"Did you look hard enough?"

"Of course. My men searched the whole house, thoroughly, I searched this room once myself."

"Including the closet?"

"Including the closet."

"But you had decided the killer was a young woman, of very slight build. Which meant you looked where? Among the clothes? On the shelf above the hangers? On the floor? I suggest you think of the killer as a very tall person, standing in that doorway just as you are now. Where would he hide the knife?"

The thought came to Leroux. He stretched to his tiptoes, reaching as high as he could, to the ledge formed by the piece of trim inside the closet above the doorframe. His hand came down holding a kitchen knife, its blade discolored by dried blood.

"Impossible!" blurted Vieira.

"What makes you say that, M. Vieira?" Aichele said, curiously.

Vieira was silent, his lips pressed tightly together.

"Impossible?" said Aichele, pressing. "Why is it impossible? Because you put the knife somewhere else?"

"This is all mere circum-

stance," Vieira said, appealing to Leroux. "It is obvious why this man chose me for a part in his little drama, but I am not the only tall man in Paris."

"True enough," said Aichele. "But you are the only tall man in Paris with a key to this house in his pocket."

Vieira reached impulsively for his pants pocket, but Aichele caught him by the wrist, and removed the key.

"Of course," Vieira said, his eyes flickering ever so slightly with fear. "M. De Metz gave me this key himself."

"No," said Aichele. "Flandrin gave you the key, which De Metz had given him long ago. It is not unusual for business partners to exchange house-keys, nor is it unusual for them to exchange boasts, such as how they have arranged to be alone in the house with a servant girl they plan to seduce. You and Flandrin knew De Metz and the maid would be the only ones here. It was the perfect opportunity to eliminate him and have the killing blamed on someone else."

Vieira looked toward the doorway, but Mrs. Poll was there, leaning comfortably against the doorjamb. When he turned back to Leroux, the inspector had once again drawn his revolver.

"There is your killer, Leroux," said Aichele. "But he is correct

in one thing—the evidence against him is purely circumstantial. Your task is to close the trap permanently by converting that evidence into proof."

Leroux looked somewhat at a loss.

"First," Aichele said, "telegraph the customs house at Calais and request a boarding party be sent immediately to the S. S. *San Miguel*, which the Marine Registry shows docked there on Thursday. This ship, remember, was diverted from the Amazon port of Belém to Bahia, which happens to be one of Brazil's largest tobacco processing and exporting centers, and M. Vieira's base of operations, I would venture to guess."

"Tobacco?" said Leroux.

"Tobacco smuggling. Why would the manifest filed with the Marine Registry list only hardwood for a ship which went weeks out of its way to call in Bahia? The hardwood was loaded in Belém, at the mouth of the Amazon, and then the tobacco hidden on board in Bahia. And because the *San Miguel* is owned by a reputable and well-known firm, it probably receives only cursory customs inspections. The only other requirement is buyers willing to circumvent the state monopoly, and everyone involved turns a handsome, duty-free profit. In fact, Flandrin is probably supervising the unloading and

distribution at this very moment."

"And they killed De Metz because he would not go along with them."

"He seems to have known that the *San Miguel* had been diverted, and he seems to have found out enough about M. Vieira to know he wanted nothing to do with him. But Flandrin and Vieira had already committed the firm to their scheme—the *San Miguel* was full of contraband, and Vieira did not come all the way from Brazil merely to make suggestions. At best, De Metz would have demanded a share of the profits and, at worst, he could have exposed the whole operation. But I'm sure Flandrin and M. Vieira here will gladly provide the details, so long as you give each of them a chance to portray himself as a mere dupe, and the other as the mastermind. For now we have more urgent matters, namely, bringing Mlle. Roland's evening in the Préfecture de Police to a happy end."

The following Wednesday afternoon Mrs. Poll had just hung the last of the cast iron saucepans on the wall above the kitchen sink when Aichele came in, carrying a bottle and two glasses.

"Care for some English whisky?" he said.

"You mean scotch?"

He held the bottle up and pretended to frown at the label.

"I suppose so."

"Then I'd be delighted."

They sat at the kitchen table.

"I see the papers are full of how Inspector Leroux single-handedly solved the murder of M. De Metz, not to mention breaking up one of the largest smuggling operations in recent memory."

"Yes," said Aichele as he poured. "He's a credit to the force." He raised the glass. "Good health."

"Good health," she answered.

"I have dinner reservations at Paillard for tonight, if you're free."

"Free as a bird."

"Your performance Saturday night was superb."

"And yours, inspector. And it was a fine bit of detective work remembering that Portuguese character and knowing just where to find him."

"Well, it was obvious from the beginning that I would have no trouble proving Camille was not the killer, and that did free my imagination for the more interesting aspects of the case. Of course, we were lucky Vieira used his real name. I suppose it opened a few doors for him in Brazil. But it did allow me to connect our extraordinarily tall killer with our extraordinarily tall Portuguese, and realize they

were one and the same. And where else does a foreigner go but to a tavern where he can hear his own language and eat some familiar food? I did know from his days as H. Leblanc that O Globo was Vieira's favorite haunt. And I also confess recalling that Leblanc's downfall was his inability to resist even the most chancy proposition if it held the slightest hope for criminal profit. Our little performance was an excellent one, but I am afraid it was Vieira's greed that blinded him to the absurdity of two strangers sitting down at his elbow to argue over burglarizing the very house to which he held the key."

They were interrupted by a knock at the door, which Aichele answered. He returned to

the kitchen with an envelope in his hand.

"It was a messenger," he said, slitting the envelope with a letter opener and taking out a folded, cream-colored card.

"It looks like a wedding invitation to me," said Mrs. Poll.

Aichele stood, reading the card. "It is a wedding invitation," he said. "From the Bouchard family."

"So young M. Bouchard and Mlle. Roland are tying the knot?"

"No," said Aichele, and then smiled as if some small but pressing weight, which he could never have described, was lifted from his thoughts. "Auguste Longnon and Mme. Bouchard are to be married in the spring, and we are invited to the wedding."

Behold, Kra K'l!

The Bohemian Demon of Gardenia Street

by Richard F. McGonegal



George had three passions: reading Dostoevsky, doting on a ballerina named Trudi (short for Trudulohov or some such surname), and conjuring demons.

By contrast, I had none—at least none of those.

Although we were both graduate students, George and I had met not as classmates, but as neighbors—two refugees who had fled to the residential sec-

tion of Gardenia Street to escape the perpetual pandemonium of campus life.

George lived upstairs in the tidy two-story across the street. I had been to his place only twice in the three years we had known each other, both times on Saturday nights when Mrs. Medvedsky—the Czechoslovakian landlady who lived on the main floor and imposed a strict “no visitors” rule—routinely went to church.

I had tried to make friends with Mrs. Medvedsky, hoping for an exemption from the “no visitors” rule. I was tired of constantly playing host to George or, more often, both George and Trudi. But my smiles and “hellos” yielded nothing more than an impassive scowl. The only real exchange I ever had with Mrs. Medvedsky was the time she whacked me with a broom while I was leaning against her white picket fence, waiting for George. “You breaking it” were her only words when I looked at her, dumbstruck. I learned later from George that the scowl was a fixed feature and that she added *-ing* to every verb in the English language.

In time, I accepted my role as unrequited host and even began looking forward to George’s erratic visits. He would come at any hour of the day or night, sometimes as often as three times a day, other times as in-

frequently as every two weeks.

It was toward the end of one of those two week spans when I heard his familiar knock.

“I need your help,” he said abruptly, pushing open the door and parading in, followed by Trudi. Whenever I saw Trudi, I always marveled at how a girl so tall could weigh so little.

“Name it,” I said, motioning for them to take seats at the kitchen table.

George sat down, Trudi sat down. “I need you to help me conjure a demon,” George said.

I sat down. “Why me?” I asked.

“It takes two people,” George replied.

I looked at Trudi.

“Too dangerous for her,” George said, misinterpreting my look. I wasn’t trying to volunteer her, I was trying to determine if George was serious. Her expression revealed nothing.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Just how dangerous are we talking about?”

“Oh, it’s no problem—as long as we do it right,” George replied.

“Have you ever done this before?”

“Well, I’ve tried a few times, but I haven’t had any luck yet.”

“Luck?” I asked.

“Okay, success,” he said. “You know what I mean.”

I stared at him for a long, si-

lent moment. "I don't think so," I said finally.

"Why not?"

"Uh-uh," I said, wagging my finger at him. "The question is 'why?' Why should I?"

George leaned forward, folded his hands together and placed them on the table. "To prove," he said in a slow, measured voice, "that God exists."

"By conjuring a demon?"

"Sure," George said, emphatically. "People are always trying to conjure God, have been for centuries. They go to church, prayer meetings, even go on TV. But what have they proved? Nothing. So I say, why not try another approach? You see, if we can conjure a demon, then we prove Satan exists. And if he exists, then God must exist. And the bands of angels, the whole works. Otherwise, Satan would have taken over a long time ago and we'd all be totally evil instead of just working at it."

He paused a moment, then added, "It's not a new idea."

Trudi and I looked at each other, equally baffled.

"Well," George said, after a long pause. "What about it?"

"I don't know," I replied. "I mean, you've got my curiosity aroused, but I need to know a lot more about what's involved and what I'm in for."

He proceeded to outline the entire plan and, in the end, it

sounded so implausible I agreed.

"Now remember," George said as he rummaged through a heap of papers and assorted junk in the corner of his room, "her name is Kra K'l." It was Saturday night, Mrs. Medvedsky was at church, and we were preparing to conjure.

"Krackel," I repeated.

"Not crackle," he said. "You make her sound like a breakfast cereal. It's Kra K'l: Like Raquel, but with a K and a slight hesitation between syllables."

I repeated the name and he nodded approval.

If Kra K'l dealt in chaos, I thought as I surveyed George's apartment, she was going to feel right at home here. The place looked as if someone had detonated a dozen garbage bags filled with books and papers within its confines. The only semblance of order was the photographs of Trudi, who arabesqued, pirouetted, and pas de cheveled across the far wall in tights, toe shoes, and diaphanous tutu.

"And you say you don't know what she's going to look like?" I asked for the umpteenth time. I was nervous.

"No way to be sure," George said. "She can take any number of forms. Aha!" He straightened

up and displayed a brown sandwich bag. "See those four tape marks on the floor?"

"I see three," I replied.

He handed me the bag, then pushed aside a stuffed chair littered with books, revealing the fourth mark. "Take that stuff in the bag and sprinkle it from mark to mark so you make the outline of a diamond," he said.

"What is it?" I asked, sniffing cautiously at the contents: a gray-green powdery substance.

"Just some stuff I mixed up," he said. Then, with a wry smile forming at the edges of his mouth, he added, "But I wouldn't sneeze in it if I were you."

I jerked my nose away from the bag. "What's it for?" I asked. I was beginning to realize that although I had asked a lot of questions in advance, George's answers had been very general. I was also beginning to realize that because I had never done anything like this before, I had overlooked a lot of questions.

"It forms a kind of barrier," George said. "We'll get Kra K'l to appear inside the diamond and that's where she'll stay."

"Are you sure it's supposed to be a diamond?" I asked. "I always thought it was supposed to be a pentagonal."

"Pentagram," George corrected. "But that's for your Assyrian, Mesopotamian, and other Middle Eastern-type demons. Kra K'l is Eastern Eu-

ropean, Bohemian actually. For them, it's diamonds."

I began spreading the powder on the floor, making straight and steady lines from mark to mark. If this was going to be Kra K'l's cage, I wanted it to be secure. "What's Bohemia now?" I asked, nearing the halfway point of my task.

"Czechoslovakia," George said.

I shuddered, leaving a zigzag of powder. "This doesn't have anything to do with Mrs. Medvedsky, does it?"

"Well, she's kind of like the bait, in a way," George said.

I stopped spreading and looked at him, but he was stooped over behind the chair.

"In the old days they used candles at the corners," George said, "but today . . . *voilà*." He held up in each hand a large flashlight with rectangular bases and handles that had a red blinker on one end and a flashlight cowl on the other. "I've got a couple more of these around here someplace," he said, poking his head behind the chair again.

"What do you mean, Mrs. Medvedsky is the bait?" I asked.

"How can I explain it?" George mused aloud as he shifted his rummaging to the area behind the sofa. "Kra K'l is kind of like a scout. Think of Satan as the big chief. He doesn't go out on his own and look for people to

possess and stuff like that. He has scouts for that sort of thing. What we're going to do is make Kra K'l think there's a Christian soul who has lost faith — specifically Mrs. Medvedsky. And when Kra K'l comes to scout it out . . . wham, we trap her."

I looked George straight in the eye to determine whether he was putting me on. He wasn't—an observation that made me wonder if any other demonologist had ever invoked the "big chief and scout" metaphor to describe the craft.

I continued spreading the powder while George rounded up the remaining flashlights. "Know what this is?" he asked. He held up a shallow, cylindrical clear plastic dish.

It looked like the kind of thing I kept my pet turtle Scooter in when I was a kid. "Looks like one of those turtle house things," I ventured.

"Exactly," George said, smiling. "Except it's called a turtle aquarium."

"In case Kra K'l shows up in the form of a pet turtle, right?"

"Go ahead, poke fun at a demon," George said. "Very courageous."

He was kidding, but his comment made me nervous, nonetheless. Despite the sheer ludicrousness of the whole scene, I could not dispel the anxiety I felt. As much as I tried to tell

myself that nothing could possibly come of this charade, I could see George was absolutely serious. He was eccentric, maybe even a little batty, but he was serious about this.

I finished my spreading. It looked pretty good. I was contemplating ways to tell George that I was bailing out, quitting, giving up the cause—but something held me back.

George had a flashlight at each point of the diamond and began adjusting the beams toward the center.

"George," I said, hesitantly, "where'd you pick up this stuff?"

"Catalogues," he replied.

"Catalogues?"

"Mail order," he said. "I got a hell of a deal on the flashlights."

His choice of words amused me. "No," I said, "I meant the conjuring stuff."

"Oh, that," he said as he waddled around the diamond, refining his adjustments to the light beams. "Books mostly. But I've had to improvise a lot."

"We don't have to sacrifice anything, do we?" I asked. "I mean, you know, like animals?"

He looked at me with a blank stare. "What'd you have in mind?"

"Nothing," I replied. "Just asking."

He shook his head slightly and rolled his eyes, then

resumed his rummaging.

Although I was a little miffed, I felt somehow relieved. His confessed improvisations—the powdery whatever, the flashlights, the turtle aquarium—suddenly all seemed laughably harmless.

"What are you looking for?" I asked, as his rummaging grew more frantic.

"The damn woodblock," he said, flinging papers in the air and sweeping books off the sofa.

I held up the woodblock and stick he had given me earlier. "I've got it."

"Okay," he said, "let's run through this last part one more time. Now, all you need to do is chant 'Kra K'l' over and over while you hit the woodblock on each syllable. Kra K'l, Kra K'l, Kra K'l," he chanted while clapping his hands with the rhythm of the words. "Try it."

"Kra K'l, Kra K'l, Kra K'l," I repeated.

"Slower," he advised, then chimed in, "Kra K'l, Kra K'l, good, Kra K'l, Kra K'l, okay." We stopped.

"Now, while you're doing that," he said, "I'm going to be reciting the 'Lamentation of the Lost.' It's real arhythmic, but don't let it throw you off your tempo. This is the lamentation that Christians used when they had a breach of faith. Your chant is like a homing device which lets Kra K'l

know where we are, and my lamentation is kind of like the drawing card. You see, all those religious artifacts Mrs. Medvedsky has downstairs give off an aura that this is a Christian house. What we're going to do is try to trick Kra K'l into thinking Mrs. Medvedsky has lost faith and is calling out in distress. Got it?"

"Got it," I said.

"Good," George said. "Now the main thing is that you don't stop the chant once we've begun. It may take some time, but don't stop unless I do. No matter what you see, or hear, or sense, don't stop the chant. Okay?"

"Okay," I replied.

"It's important," he said.

"Okay!" I said, abruptly. "I understand."

George positioned me on the outside of the diamond at the angle nearest the door. He put the turtle aquarium inside the diamond at the angle farthest from me, then poured some gooey liquid into it from a Tupperware pitcher. He placed his feet just outside the far angle, surveyed the scene for a moment, and gave the starting nod.

We began. After about a minute, I found that if I closed my eyes, I could concentrate better in the face of his shrill, obnoxious lamentation. I chanted, he lamented, for five minutes, then

ten, then twenty, then forty. Occasionally, I opened my eyes to look at the clock and to look at George, hoping for some sign from him that we could quit soon. I was bored and sweaty, and his lamentation was making me irritable.

A cool breeze carrying a faint, sweet odor swept over me, and when I opened my eyes, I could see the vague outline of an image forming inside the diamond. My eyes widened, my heartbeat quickened as I watched the image take the shape of a woman. She was tall, thin, and angular. She wore white robes like the ones women wore in Hercules movies, and her face was shrouded in a translucent white veil. Although I couldn't discern her features, she looked unmistakably like Trudi.

I glanced at George, who gave me a furtive look that signaled not to stop the chant.

I looked back at the woman, straining to see the features behind the veil, convinced now that it was Trudi and that they were playing an elaborate joke at my expense. What baffled me was what kind of trick they had used to make her appear out of thin air.

The woman spoke in a language totally foreign to me, and her voice was deep, ponderous—nothing like Trudi's.

"I do not understand your

language," George said.

The woman turned toward him. "Who summoned me?" she demanded.

"You have been summoned by the 'Lamentation of the Lost,'" George said. "Speak your name."

"I am known by many names," she said.

"Is Kra K'l among them?" George asked. His voice was steady, resolute.

"Perhaps," she said. "Why do you summon me?"

"I call upon you to tell me from where you came," George demanded.

The woman turned toward me and approached, stopping just at the inside edge of the diamond. "This has gone too far," she whispered. The voice was undeniably Trudi's. "I'm sorry we played this trick on you. I didn't want to do it, but he talked me into it."

"I knew it," I shouted. I was angry, confused, resentful.

"Don't listen to her," George screamed, scurrying around the edges of the diamond. "Whatever she said, don't listen to her. What did she say?"

"C'mon George," I said. "I know who it is. The joke's over."

"No, it's a trick," he yelled, grabbing me by the shoulders.

"Yeah, it's a trick all right," I said. "And I fell for it."

"Just break the line," she whispered to me quietly. "Show

your anger. Break the line."

I moved forward, but George pushed me back. "Are you crazy?" he cried. He looked back at the woman and he seemed genuinely confounded at hearing Trudi's voice.

"See that," I said. "How can she look like Trudi and talk like Trudi, if she isn't Trudi?"

George stared blankly for a moment. "There," he said suddenly, pointing to the photographs on the wall. He looked back at me. "If that's Trudi in the diamond, she could cross the line." If George was acting, he was displaying a talent I had never seen before.

"Dammit!" George said, as we both heard the sound of the front door opening downstairs. "Mrs. Medvedsky's back."

A whirlwind swept the room, a bone-chilling cold wind that scattered papers and rattled the walls as a noxious odor filled my nostrils. The figure within the diamond had become a blur of motion, hazy and indistinct. I clutched George's arm as I watched the new image take shape—three-toed claw feet, four long arms with sharp talon fingers, two dragon-like wings folded behind her shoulders, a sharp flaring snout, glistening ivory teeth set in deep blue gums, eyes like blue flames and a body covered entirely with blue-green scales. The creature was both horrible and

breathhtakingly beautiful.

"Behold, Kra K'l!" George cried out. He turned to me and whispered, "Christians seem to bring out the worst in them."

The footsteps came rapidly up the stairs, the apartment door burst open. Behold, Mrs. Medvedsky—broom in hand and a pissed-off scowl on her face.

"I thought I telling you no visitors," she said adamantly.

The demon snorted, hitting us with a cold, stinking blast.

"You," the landlady said, turning on the demon. "What are you being here looking like that?" She swiped at the demon with the broom, missed, and scattered the powder about the room.

Kra K'l lunged from the broken diamond and Mrs. Medvedsky turned like a second baseman and whacked the demon across the backside with the broom. Kra K'l bolted down the steps.

"And you," she said, wielding the broom in a threatening gesture as she turned to me.

I cowered; George gripped his hair. "Jesus," he said. "Mrs. Medvedsky, I'll explain everything later." He turned to me. "C'mon."

I followed him down the stairs in a run.

"We did it!" he shouted exuberantly, on the front porch, raising his arms and looking toward the heavens. He put his

hands on my shoulders. "We did it."

I was speechless.

"We've got to find her," he said. He headed for the street.

"Wait a minute," I said, catching up with him and walking briskly beside him down Gardenia Street. "What are we going to do when we find her? I mean, how do we get rid of her?"

"We can cover more ground if we split up," he said. "You go that way and I'll . . ."

"I'm not going off on my own," I said. "I don't know how to get rid of her if I find her. How do we get rid of her?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

"There are a couple of ways," he said, "but I don't know how well they'll work. This is my first demon." He paused a moment. "Anyway, first we've got to find her."

"She can't keep changing forms like that, can she?" I was scared, nearly hysterical, and I was hoping for a firm "no."

"As a matter of fact, she can."

"Great," I said. "Just great. You realize she could be anybody. Or anything. She could be a dog, or a squirrel, or an alley cat."

"Don't worry," George said. "I'll know her when I see her." He sounded confident.

I followed him. I had no choice.

We searched everywhere — streets, alleys, garages, under porches—to no avail.

After several hours, we came to a wooden bench at a bus stop and George collapsed onto the seat. I climbed up on the backrest, dangling and swinging my feet above the seat as I scanned the empty streets.

"You realize what we've done?" I said, musing out loud.

George chuckled quietly.

"What's so damned funny?" I asked. I was dead serious.

Between chuckles, he said, "I can't believe Mrs. Medvedsky smacked her with a broom." His chuckles turned to quiet laughter.

It was contagious. There we sat—the two guys who had just turned a demon loose upon the world—laughing out loud.

After a few moments, we both stopped and looked at each other, as if we were sharing the same thought.

"George," I said, "now that we know He's up there, do you think He'll forgive us for this?"

In the week following the conjuring, events went from bad to worse, culminating with a visit from George. Under the circumstances, his appearance seemed somehow appropriate.

I hesitated at hearing his customary knock, then relented and opened the door.

Instead of whisking into my kitchen, he stared at me across the open portal. "What happened to you?"

"I got into a nest of hornets," I replied, assuming he was referring to the prominent red welt on the tip of my swollen nose.

"You look like Bozo the Clown," he observed.

"Oh yeah, what happened to you?" I asked, gesturing toward the sling which held his left arm at a Napoleonic bent.

"Fell down the stairs," he replied.

"C'mon in."

We took seats across from each other at the kitchen table. George sniffed the air uncereemoniously.

"Grease fire," I explained. "Nearly burned up my kitchen."

"My toilet overflowed," George countered. "It was a mess."

"I had hit-and-run damage to my car."

George pondered a moment. "We're in deep."

"Any ideas?" I asked. "You're the expert."

"Two possible explanations," George said. "Either Kra K'l is having some fun at our expense, or the guy upstairs is kind of pissed off at us."

"The guy upstairs?" I repeated.

"You know," George said, refusing to be baited by my sarcasm. "Either way, it doesn't

matter. All we need to do is dispatch Kra K'l and we're in the clear."

"Simple as that?" I asked.

"Okay, where is she?"

George shrugged.

"You don't know? You have no idea?" I grew more upset as I spoke. "She could be anyone. She could be one of our professors, she could be the cashier at the bookstore, she could be Trudi, she could . . ." I paused in mid-sentence, a sudden convulsive shiver spiraling up my spine.

" . . . be me," George said unflinchingly, completing my thought.

I eyed him suspiciously. Then I backed into my bedroom, grabbed the crucifix I had hung on my bedpost, returned to the kitchen, and advanced toward him, brandishing the cross in my outstretched hand.

George bellowed—a laugh which stopped me in my tracks. "She's a demon, not a vampire, for crissake."

I tossed the crucifix on the table, humiliated. "I don't know, George, it's just that . . . what?"

He was staring out the kitchen window, his gaze intense. "There." He pointed.

I looked. Nothing seemed awry. My front yard opened onto the street. A car passed. Across the way, there was no activity, with the exception of Mrs. Medvedsky, who was

sweeping her front porch.

"What?" I repeated.

"Mrs. Medvedsky," he said, in his tone grave.

"So?"

"So, it's Saturday night. She should be at church."

"Maybe she decided not to go."

He stared at me. "She always goes."

"Always?"

He flopped back in the chair. "It makes sense," he whispered, as if thinking out loud. "They're so clever, but so arrogant. Of course Kra K'l would come back for her, after that broom thing. Jeez," he said, slapping himself on the forehead with his unfettered hand.

"You're sure?" I asked.

He nodded.

"I thought you said you'd recognize her when you saw her," I said. "You've been *living* with a damned demon."

"Kind of spooky, isn't it?" he said. "But never mind that now. We need to move."

"What are we going to do?"

"I've been doing some more research," he said. "I've got a plan."

It was my turn to think out loud. "Oh, no," I said.

"Now remember," George said as he wheeled the lawn spreader out of the shed. "I don't have the in-

gredients for any more powder, so don't lay it on too thick."

It was nearly two A.M. on Sunday morning—almost six hours of preparation after our revelation.

"You're sure the lines won't be too thin to hold her?"

George crossed his fingers. A prayer would have seemed more appropriate, but I felt—and I suspected George shared my feeling—that we were on our own until we squared things.

I tied an end of twine to one of the four stakes we had pushed into the soft turf and handed the twine ball to George, who headed across Mrs. Medvedsky's yard, unraveling it as he walked. He looped the twine around the second stake, pulled it taut and disappeared around the side of the house. As instructed, I followed with the lawn spreader, carefully guiding the wheel along the twine outline and leaving a trail of powder in my wake.

"What about the lights?" I asked, as we surveyed our handiwork—a perfect geometric diamond surrounding the house.

"Don't need 'em," George said. "The lights and the other stuff are only for conjuring." He pointed to the house. "We've already got Kra K'l trapped. Now all we need to do is get Mrs. Medvedsky out of there."

"And then we dispatch Kra K'l?"

"Right," he said.

"You're sure Mrs. Medvedsky is in there?"

"I'm sure," George said, irritably. I had posed the question before, and he had explained that Bohemian demons were shape-changers, not possessors. "If Kra K'l is assuming Mrs. Medvedsky's form for an extended period," he had reasoned, "she can't afford to have the real Mrs. Medvedsky running around loose, can she?"

"How do we get her out?"

"We go get her." He stepped across the edge of the diamond and headed toward the porch.

Using his key, George unlocked the front door. We entered cautiously and faced the door to Mrs. Medvedsky's apartment. George tried the knob—locked.

"Got a credit card?" he whispered.

I shrugged. "Try your student I.D."

He removed the laminated card from his wallet, wedged it between door and frame, twisted the knob and pushed. It yielded with a squeak.

We winced simultaneously and waited. Silence reigned. George entered first; I followed, shining my flashlight along the bare walls, vacant fireplace mantle, and naked bookshelves.

"Her stuff's all gone," George whispered.

I had never been in Mrs. Medvedsky's apartment, but I assumed the missing "stuff" was her religious paraphernalia.

Motioning for me to follow, George led the way down the hallway. We paused at the first doorway and peered into the room. Mrs. Medvedsky was lying on her back beneath the covers of a queen-size bed, snoring loudly.

"I'll get her," I said.

George grabbed me by the collar, nearly choking me as I started into the room. "Not her," George whispered. "That's Kra K'l."

I shuddered and backed out of the room.

"C'mon," George said. We tiptoed down the hall, searching the second bedroom, the bathroom, laundry room, and kitchen. Within the confines of the walk-in pantry adjoining the kitchen, we found Mrs. Medvedsky. She was seated on the floor, her wrists and ankles bound with shredded sheet and a wad of partial pillowcase stuffed into her mouth. I stooped and began working at the knots.

"Don't untie her," George said. "She'll just make a fuss. Wait till we get her out of here."

I placed an arm behind her back, another below her knees and heaved, staggering under her weight. Her eyes widened as I straightened, but she made no attempt to speak.

We emerged from the pantry, crossed the kitchen and began retracing our steps down the hall.

A sudden shadow loomed in our path as the imposing figure of the demonically-inspired Mrs. Medvedsky stepped from the bedroom.

"What are you being here in my apartment doing?" she asked, her voice a remarkable impersonation of the landlady.

"Back door," I yelled, wheeling around and preparing to run, not knowing if there was a back door but fully prepared to create one.

Again George grabbed me by the collar. The sudden resistance to my burst of momentum yanked me off my already-unstable balance. I collapsed to the floor beneath the copious weight of Mrs. Medvedsky.

"Just a second," George said. "I'm not so sure."

"Not sure," I cried. I looked up at him, then down at the woman lying in my lap.

"Too easy," George said, as if thinking out loud. "What if Kra K'l saw us spreading the powder." He pointed to the woman whose weight had me pinned to the floor. "What if she's the demon."

The four of us exchanged suspicious glances; then George pulled a crucifix from his pocket and thrust it toward the up-

right Mrs. Medvedsky. She eyed him curiously. He turned the cross on my Mrs. Medvedsky. Her reaction was similar.

I frowned at him, recalling the vampire remark. Then I sensed the faint odor of something akin to sewer gas. I sniffed, traced it to the nostrils of the woman in my lap. The warmth of her body was increasing dramatically; the sheeted bonds and pillowcase gag began smoldering.

"Run!" I screamed, lurching and grappling unsuccessfully to free myself from the weight of the disguised demon. Disregarding my command, George lunged at the shape-changer, dislodged her with a block from his good shoulder, and sent her rolling into the bathroom. I slammed the door, George grabbed the real Mrs. Medvedsky by the hand and, together, we ran from the house.

The savage splintering sound of the bathroom door giving way reached us as we momentarily wedged ourselves—three abreast—in the front doorway. I yielded; George and Mrs. Medvedsky hurried through. They stopped abruptly as Mrs. Medvedsky grabbed the broom leaning against the porch railing and clutched it menacingly with both hands. George grabbed the broomstick with his able hand and they tugged

back and forth, each trying to wrest it from the other.

I was attempting to maneuver around George when Kra K'l—transformed into her horribly beautiful blue-green self—suddenly perforated the exterior walls of the house and flew wildly into the yard. George released the broom, careened backwards, and knocked me over the porch railing. I landed unscathed, but cracked a juniper bush and crushed four yellow mums. Mrs. Medvedsky cried out. Kra K'l twisted her head to glare at us as her momentum carried her toward the diamond outline and—like a sparrow hitting a picture window—she crashed into the demon-barrier and crumpled in a heap.

We stared silently at the inert demon. "Quick," I yelled, regaining my senses after a momentary lapse, "the chant."

George began chanting; Kra K'l flinched. She arose unsteadily, bared her ivory teeth, flexed her scaly wings, and bolted into the air. We watched as she ascended like a bottle-rocket, smashed into some invisible ceiling, and dipped into a tailspin.

"Aha," I cried, my optimism premature. Kra K'l recovered from the plunge before hitting

the ground. She dived at us like a screaming kamikaze—mouth agape, claws unfurled. Mrs. Medvedsky flailed erratically with the broom, failing to make contact but warding off the demon. Kra K'l punctured the facade of the house, and the sounds of interior destruction prompted George to chant more loudly to compete with the din.

The demon exited by piercing a hole in the roof, but when she appeared to us again, her scaly skin seemed ablaze with blue-green sparks. She landed on the sidewalk in front of us, her rapidly-dissipating form clouded in greenish haze. The vague outline of her mouth tried to form a word, but no sound emerged. It seemed as if she were asking: "Why?"

When the haze lifted, no trace of Kra K'l remained. The house, however, yielded visible proof of her destructive departure. Around us, lights had come on in neighboring homes, people watched from their porches and yards and—in the distance—we could hear the sound of approaching sirens.

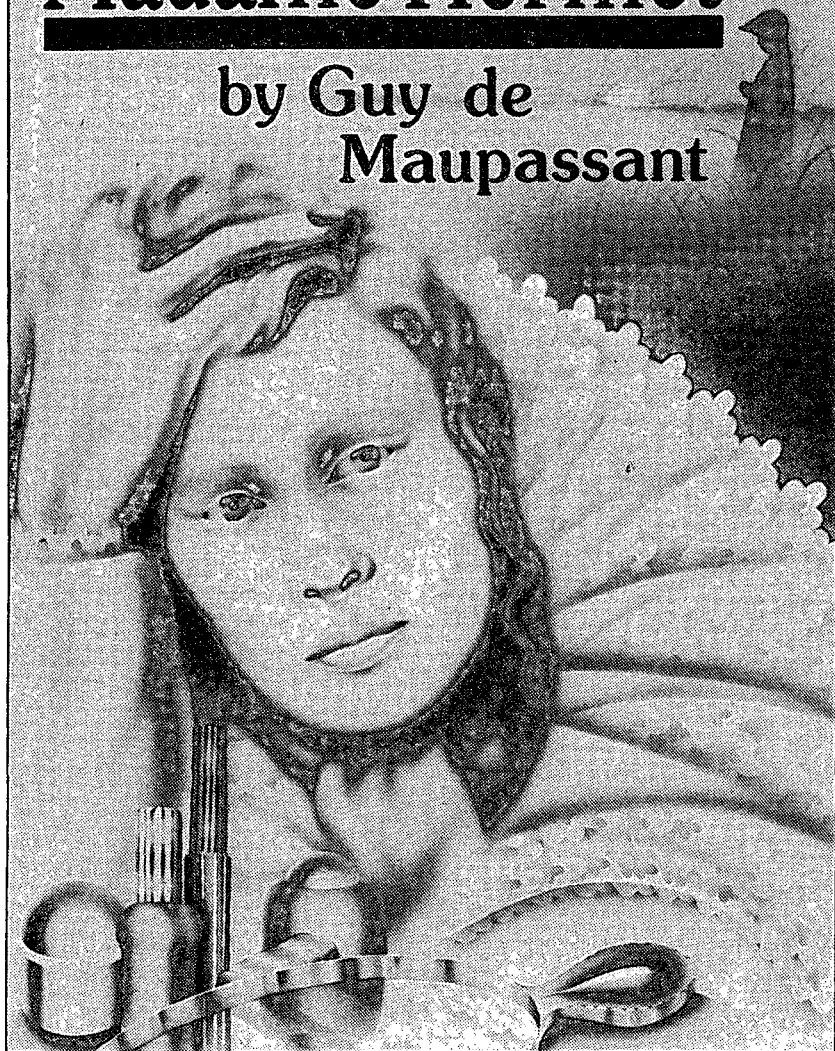
George looked at the smoldering perforations in the facade of Mrs. Medvedsky's house. "Looks like we're going to have a little explaining to do."

"Amen," I said.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

Madame Hermet

by Guy de
Maupassant



Madmen fascinate me. These beings live in a mysterious land of fantastic dreams, in that impenetrable cloud of insanity where all that they have seen on earth, all that they have loved, all that they have done, lives again for them in an imaginary existence outside all the laws that govern the world and order human thought.

For them the impossible does not exist, the unlikely disappears, the fairy world becomes the natural world, and the supernatural familiar. Logic, that ancient barrier, reason, that ancient wall, good sense, that ancient balustrade of the mind, is broken, shattered, demolished by their imagination, which has been loosed into freedom, has escaped into the realms of fantasy to which no bounds are set, and rushes forward in fabulous leaps without let or hindrance. *For them everything happens and everything can happen.* They make no efforts to conquer events, overcome resistances, surmount obstacles. A mere whim of their fantasy-creating will allows them to become princes, emperors, or gods, to possess all the riches of the world, all the good things of life, allows them to enjoy all pleasures, allows them to be always strong, always beautiful, always young, always loved. Of all creatures on this earth, they alone are happy, since for them reality no longer exists. I like to hang over their vagabond minds, as one hangs over an abyss in whose depths boils an unknown torrent, come one knows not whence and going one knows not whither.

But it avails us nothing to hang over these ravines, since we could never know whence comes that stream or whither it goes. After all, it is only a stream, like the streams that run in broad daylight, and a sight of it would teach us very little.

It avails us as little to hang over the minds of madmen, for their most fantastic ideas are, in effect, no more than ideas already known to us, made strange only because they are no longer shackled by Reason. That capricious spring confounds and amazes us because we do not see the place of its rising. Doubtless a little stone dropped in its course is enough to produce these whirlpools. Nevertheless, madmen fascinate me, and I keep going back to them, attracted in spite of myself by this commonplace mystery of insanity.

But one day, as I was visiting one of their asylums, the doctor who was escorting me said:

"Come, I'll show you an interesting case."

And he opened a cell in which a woman of about forty years of

age, still beautiful, was seated in a big armchair, gazing fixedly at her face in a small hand glass.

As soon as she saw us, she stood up, ran to the farther side of the room to get a veil thrown down on a chair, very carefully swathed her face in it, then returned, replying to our greetings by a sign of her head.

"Well," said the doctor, "how are you this morning?"

She uttered a deep sigh.

"Oh, ill, very ill, doctor, the marks get worse every day."

He replied with an air of conviction:

"No, certainly not, I assure you that you're mistaken."

She drew close to him to murmur:

"No. I'm sure of it. I've counted ten more marks this morning, three on the right cheek, four on the left cheek, and three on my forehead. It's frightful, frightful. I daren't let anyone see me now, not even my son, no, not even he! I'm ruined. I'm disfigured for life."

She sank back into her armchair and began to sob.

The doctor took a chair, seated himself near her, and in a gentle, comforting voice said:

"Come now, let me look, I assure you it's nothing. By a slight cauterizing, I can make them all disappear."

She shook her head, without saying a word. He tried to touch her veil, but she grasped it in both hands with such violence that her fingers went through it.

He began afresh to exhort and reassure her.

"Come, now, you know quite well that I remove the ugly pock-marks from your skin every time and that you can't see them at all when I have attended to them. If you don't show them to me, I can't cure you."

She murmured:

"I'm quite willing to let you look again, but I don't know this gentleman who is with you."

"He is a doctor, too, who can attend to you even better than I can."

Then she uncovered her face, but her fear and her emotion, her shame at being seen, made her blush even over her throat, to the point where her gown covered it. She lowered her eyes, turned her face now to the right and now to the left, to escape our gaze, and stammered:

"Oh, it makes me suffer agonies to let you see me like this. It's

horrible, isn't it? Isn't it horrible?"

I looked at her in the utmost amazement, for she had nothing on her face, not a mark, not a stain, not a sign nor a scar.

She turned towards me, keeping her eyes lowered, and said to me:

"It was through nursing my son that I contracted this frightful disease. I saved him, but I am disfigured. I gave my beauty to my poor child. Well, I did my duty, and my conscience is at rest. If I suffer, only God knows it."

The doctor had taken from his pocket a slender watercolor brush.

"Allow me," said he, "I'll put it all right for you."

She turned to him her right cheek, and he began to lay light touches on it, as if he were putting small dabs of paint on it. He did the same to the left cheek, then to the chin, then the forehead; then he cried:

"Look, it's all gone, all gone."

She took up her glass, gazed at herself for a long time with a searching intensity, a harrowing intensity, a savagely concentrated mental effort to discover something, then she sighed:

"No. There's very little to see now. Thank you very much indeed."

The doctor rose. He took leave of her, ushered me out and followed me; and as soon as the door was closed, said:

"I'll tell you that poor woman's dreadful story."

Her name is Mme. Hermet. She was very beautiful, a real coquette, loved of many, and full of the joy of life.

She was one of those women whose sole consolation in life is derived from, and their conduct dictated by, their beauty and their desire to please.

The unremitting anxiety to preserve her freshness, the care of her face, her hands, teeth, of every part of her body that she could display, absorbed all her time and all her attention.

She became a widow, with one son. The child was brought up in the same way as are all children of much-admired women. She loved him, however.

He grew up, and she grew old. Whether or not she saw the fatal moment coming, I don't know. Did she, like so many others, gaze every morning for hours and hours at the skin that used to be so delicate, so clear and fresh, and now is wrinkling a little under the eyes, creasing itself in a thousand lines that are imperceptible now but will deepen and deepen, day by day, month by month? And did she see, more and more strongly marked, advancing with slow

relentless certainty, the long lines graven on the forehead, those thin serpents whose progress nothing halts? Did she endure the torture, the abominable torture, of the looking glass, of the small silver hand glass that she could not resolve to leave on the table, then threw down in anger, and a moment later picked up again, to see once more, ever nearer and nearer, the hateful silent ravages of approaching age? Did she shut herself up ten, twenty times a day, leaving, for no reason, the drawing room where her friends were chatting, to go up to her bedroom and, safeguarded by bolts and locks, gaze again on the destruction at work in the ripened, fading flesh, to examine despairingly the hardly perceptible advance that so far no one else seems to notice but of which she herself is bitterly aware? She knows where the most serious ravages are, where the tooth of age bites deepest. And the glass, the small, quite round glass in its frame of chased silver, says dreadful things to her, for it speaks, it seems to laugh, it rails on her and predicts all that is coming to pass, all the miseries of her body, and the atrocious torture of her mind that will endure to the day of her death, which will be that of her deliverance.

Did she weep, distracted, on her knees, her forehead on the ground, and pray, pray, pray to Him who kills His creatures thus, giving them youth only to make age the more bitter, and lending them beauty only to take it back almost at once; did she pray Him, implore Him, to grant to her what He had never granted to anyone, to allow her to keep until her last day, charm and freshness and grace? Then, realizing that in vain does she implore the implacable Unknown who adds year to year in endless number, did she roll with writhing arms on the carpet of her room, did she beat her forehead on its furniture and stifle in her throat her frightful, despairing cries?

She must have endured these tortures. For this is what happened:

One day (she was then thirty-five years old) her son, aged fifteen, fell ill.

He took to his bed before the doctors had been able to diagnose the cause of his illness or its nature. An *abbé*, his tutor, watched over him, hardly leaving his side, while Mme. Hermet came morning and evening to hear his report.

She entered in the morning in a rest gown, smiling, already scented, and asked, from the door:

"Well, George, are you getting better?"

The tall youngster, crimson, his face swollen, and wasted by the fever, would answer:

"Yes, Mummie, a little better."

She lingered a few moments in the bedroom, examining the bottles of medicine and making little grimaces of disgust, then suddenly cried: "Oh, I was forgetting something very important," and she took herself off, running, leaving behind her the delicate fragrance of her morning toilet.

At night she appeared in her evening gown, in a still greater hurry, for she was always late, and had just time to ask:

"Well, what did the doctor say?"

The *abbé* replied:

"He's not sure yet, madame."

But, one evening, the *abbé* replied:

"Madame, your son has taken smallpox."

She uttered a loud cry of fear and rushed away.

When her maid came to her room next morning the first thing she noticed in the room was a strong smell of burnt sugar, and she found her mistress, wide awake, her face pale for lack of sleep, and shaking with anguish in her bed.

As soon as the shutters were open Mme. Hermet asked, "How is George?"

"Oh, not at all well today, madame."

She did not get up until midday, ate two eggs with a cup of tea, as if she herself were ill, then she went out and consulted a chemist as to the best methods of keeping off the infection of smallpox.

She did not return until dinnertime, laden with phials, and shut herself at once in her room, where she soaked herself in disinfectants.

The *abbé* was waiting for her in the dining room. As soon as she caught sight of him she cried, in a voice full of emotion:

"Well?"

"Oh, no better. The doctor is very anxious."

She began to cry, and could eat nothing, so wretched was she.

The next day, at dawn, she sent for news: the report was no better, and she spent the whole day in her room, where small braziers were smoking and filling the room with powerful odors. Moreover, her maid declared that she heard her moaning all the evening.

A whole week passed in this way: she did nothing at all but go out for an hour or two to take the air, towards the middle of the afternoon.

She asked for news every hour now, and sobbed when each report was worse.

On the morning of the eleventh day, the *abbé* was announced, entered her room, his face grave and pale, and declining the chair that was offered him, said:

"Madame, your son is very ill, and he wants to see you."

She flung herself on her knees, crying:

"Oh, my God, oh, my God, I daren't! My God, my God! help me!"

The priest answered:

"The doctor holds out very little hope, madame, and George is waiting for you."

Then he went out.

Two hours later, as the boy, feeling himself near death, asked again for his mother, the *abbé* went back to her room and found her still on her knees, still weeping and repeating:

"I won't . . . I won't . . . I am too frightened . . . I won't . . ."

He tried to persuade her, to stiffen her resolution, to lead her out. He succeeded only in giving her a fit of hysteria which lasted for a long time and made her scream.

The doctor came again towards evening, was told of her cowardice, and declared that he himself would fetch her, by persuasion or force. But when, after having exhausted all his arguments, he put his arm around her to carry her off to her son, she seized the door and clung to it so desperately that no one could tear her away. Then, released, she prostrated herself at the doctor's feet, begging for pardon, and accusing herself of wickedness. She kept crying: "Oh, he's not going to die, tell me he's not going to die, I implore you, tell him that I love him, that I adore him. . . ."

The boy lay at the point of death. Realizing that he only had a few moments left, he begged them to persuade his mother to say goodbye to him. With strange insight that the dying sometimes possess, he had realized the truth, divined it, and said: "If she is afraid to come in, just beg her to come along the balcony as far as my window so that at least I can see her and say goodbye to her by a look, since I may not kiss her."

The doctor and the *abbé* went back once more to this woman. "You will run no risk at all," they declared, "since there will be glass between you and him."

She consented to come, covered her head, took a bottle of smelling salts, made three steps along the balcony, then suddenly, hiding her face in her hands, she moaned: "No . . . no . . . I shall never dare to look at him . . . never . . . I'm too ashamed . . . I'm too afraid . . . No . . . I can't."

They tried to drag her along, but she held with both hands to the bars and uttered such wails that the people passing by in the street lifted their heads.

And the dying boy waited, his eyes turned towards this window, he waited, putting off death until he should have looked one last time on that gentle beloved face, his mother's blessed face.

He waited for a long time, and night fell. Then he turned his face to the wall and never spoke again.

When day broke, he was dead. The next day, she was a madwoman.

SOLUTION TO THE APRIL "UNSOLVED":

1. Yes, obviously.
2. No, there is no reason for so thinking.
3. Yes, as proved by the back of the check.
4. Yes. Look at the bottom right-hand corner of the face of the check. When a check is cleared, the amount is printed by computer on the bottom right-hand corner, which in unused checks is blank. The last digits record the amount of the check. Thus a five dollar check would be recorded as 0000000500, and a five thousand dollar check would appear as 0000500000. It is therefore apparent that the original amount of the check was five dollars, and was subsequently raised to five thousand dollars, and done so *after* it had been cleared and sent to Tootsie, the payer.
5. Julius told her that she could be put in prison as a result of her attempted fraud, and she disliked prison. Tootsie, however, was made of sturdy stuff, and as soon as she came out of her faint, she looked up at Julius and said with an appealing smile, "Does that mean I can't get my five dollars back?"

BOOKED & PRINTED

by Carol Harper



Photo by Kevin Martin

MARK HEBDEN

Chief Inspector Evariste Clovis Desiré Pel of the Brigade Criminelle of the Police Judiciaire of the Republic of France is biased against anything not Burgundian and a hypochondriac who is always trying, unsuccessfully, to quit smoking, or at least cut down from one million to half a million per day. He dislikes just about everything and everyone he is in contact with but is considered to be an excellent cop by his superiors and by his staff, who have great regard for him.

Pel lived in an unidentified city in Burgundy ("If there hadn't been a place like Burgundy, . . . then surely someone would have had to invent it. . . . If Paris was the face of

France, then Burgundy was surely the heart, a generous region that made the rest of France superfluous.") in a rundown house with a horrible garden in Rue Martin-de-Noinville, until his marriage to Madame Pel, when they fixed up an apartment over her shop and bought a house in Fontaine and a summer cottage in the Jura. His private life is something of a joke—his housekeeper, Madame Routy, must be the only woman in Burgundy, if not all of France, who can't cook.

Pel is lonely—he hates his name even though his parents had all the best intentions in bestowing it upon him. Girls have laughed at it all his life (one even fell out of bed when she first heard it) and, even

though he feels that he is the epitome of French masculinity, it isn't enough to overcome that name. After all, "he himself had a face like the Phantom of the Opera, no style with his clothes, a social manner that would have disgraced a half-wit, and an acute shortage of money which always served to highlight all his other defects." Actually, he is cheap, not poor, and is saving every penny for his retirement, which, if he lives that long, he is sure will be impoverished and miserable, just like his working days.

The Pel series is authored by Mark Hebden—ex-sailor, airman, reporter, cartoonist, travel courier, and history teacher who lives in Sussex, England, with his wife and two children. (Hebden also writes adventure stories and military histories under his real name, John Harris.) Hebden's series might interest those readers who enjoy French settings or police procedurals. Hebden is no Simenon and Pel is no Maigret, and he says that often enough in the first book, *Death Set to Music*, for it to become a litany. However, like Simenon's Maigret series and others written about French policemen (Nicolas Freeling's Henri Castang and Vincent McConner's Inspector Damiot) and private investigators (Freeling's Arlette and Marvin Albert's Pete "Stone-Angel"

Sawyer), the reader gets a good sense of place.

As in most police procedurals, while Pel is the lead character, there is a continuing cast who people these stories. The policemen include Inspector Daniel Darcy, Pel's second in command and a ladies' man who is also an excellent investigator; Sergeant Jean-Luc Nosjean, inspector material who is always unsuccessfully courting girls who look like Catherine Deneuve or Charlotte Rampling; Misset, a laggard who is always asking for the night off and whom Pel would dearly love to demote to traffic patrol; Lagé, overeager but with no imagination who does Misset's work as well as his own; Du Troc', a penniless baron and art expert who transfers in from another district in *Pel Is Puzzled*; and Kraus, who is counting the days until he can retire to his country cottage. We also meet Pel's chief, although we never really get to know him, not even his name, and several cadets, including Didier Darras, Madame Routy's nephew, who, as a boy, meets Pel in *Death Set to Music* and hits it off with him right away. Each has a skill or talent which supplements Pel, and each grows in the series, aging, being promoted, retiring, and being replaced. In this fashion, Pel's Brigade Criminelle is not un-

like the team run by John Creasy's Commander George Gideon or Ed McBain's 87th Precinct.

There are police doctors, *juges d'instruction*, newspapermen, and neighbors who also appear in many, if not all, of the books. Many of these meet with Pel's wrath—he hates most of them with the same strength he directs to all things foreign (including all things non-Burgundian), and many of his interchanges with them become verbal sparring matches.

Each book centers on one or two major crimes directly under Pel's control, while each of his team pursues peripheral, or satellite cases. Many of the leads tie one or more of the seemingly unrelated cases together, as is common in many police procedural novels, but not so many are tied together that the reader gets a feeling of overwhelming coincidence.

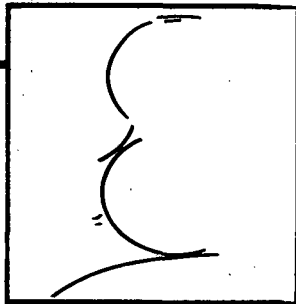
Most of Pel's cases are set in Burgundy, but he has made reluctant trips to Innsbruck (which caused him to stand up Madame Faivre-Perret — his wife — on their first date), Paris ("It was too busy and too noisy, smelled too much of hot oil and petrol fumes, and there were so many Americans it looked like

the fifty-first state of the Union. There were also students everywhere you looked—all hairy and hot and a lot of them not very clean—and tourists all down the Champs Elysées and jamming the bateaux mouches until they bulged at the seams. Pel preferred Dijon any time."), and London (where he finds, to his surprise, that the *rosbifs* don't all fit his stereotype of Englishmen).

While St. Martin's described the series as having thirteen installments, I have been able to identify only twelve titles all but two published by Walker and Company: *Death Set to Music*, *Pel and the Faceless Corpse*, *Pel Under Pressure*, *Pel Is Puzzled* (H. Hamilton, 1981), *Pel and the Staghound*, *Pel and the Bombers*, *Pel and the Predators*, *Pel and the Pirates*, *Pel and the Prowler*, *Pel Among the Pueblos*, *Pel and the Touch of Pitch*, and the latest, *Pel and the Picture of Innocence* (St. Martin's, 1989, \$14.95, 192 pp). Many should be available through your public library; I understand that this series has been reprinted in paperback in England, but these reissues are not readily available in the United States.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by William Heller



John Patrick Shanley, who won an Oscar for his *Moonstruck* screenplay, dons the mystery writer's cap for his latest effort. Set in a New York City frozen with fear, **The January Man** is a light-hearted look at the search for a serial killer who has murdered eleven women in the past eleven months.

The mayor's interest in the case snowballs when, on New Year's Eve, his daughter's best friend falls victim to the killer. Hizzoner (Rod Steiger) knows there's only one man in town who can solve the case. "Get me Nick Starkey," he bellows.

Nick Starkey (Kevin Kline) is a sort of Greenwich Village answer to the resident at London's 221-B Baker Street. The estranged brother of the police commissioner, the one-time cop was pushed off the force under

a cloud of suspected corruption—never proved.

There's no love lost between Starkey and his highpowered brother Frank (Harvey Keitel), or Starkey and any other of New York's finest for that matter. Captain Alcoa (Danny Aiello), the commanding officer who is ordered to take him into his precinct, disdainfully calls Starkey a beatnik. But this beatnik has been spending his time rescuing small children from burning buildings, for the fire department.

A smoldering passion for his brother's wife, who used to be his girlfriend, is still kindling in Nick's heart, and he accepts the commissioner's "invitation" to rejoin the force in exchange for a dinner with Mrs. Starkey (Susan Sarandon).

Although it appears that Mrs. Starkey wishes to rekindle the

romance with her now brother-in-law, the embers of this relationship are doused when he gets involved with Bernadette, the mayor's daughter (Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio), who's worried she may become the killer's next victim.

Nick sets up shop at the precinct house, where with Bernadette and his quirky artist friend Ed (Alan Rickman) he sets out to catch the killer. Although he's supposed to be some kind of offbeat cop, Nick Starkey follows the usual investigative procedure of looking for a pattern in the string of crimes.

Ed, who is also a computer expert, works the keyboard like a magician, and the trio uses a combination of mathematical deduction, street smarts, and feminine wiles to pursue the killer. But Starkey's old feud with the police hierarchy throws a wrench into the pursuit.

The January Man, part mystery, part comedy, part love story, can't seem to make up its mind what it wants to be.

Screenwriter Shanley tries to wind up the film with a Hitchcock-like twist near the end. He throws us the curve too late, however, and his pitch for suspense is a strikeout.

The comic intent of Nick Starkey as a cop who marches to the beat of a different drummer could be better conducted. As a bohemian cop, he needs a

by-the-book officer as a partner. Instead of a straight man, we get Ed the artist, who is eccentric in his own right and makes the cop look normal in contrast.

Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio and Kevin Kline make an attractive couple and one hopes that nothing bad befalls her, but that is not enough to sustain a love story, or the rest of the story.

Finding a killer is not an easy task, but the heavyweight cast here, including Rod Steiger and Danny Aiello, has an even more difficult assignment in making the sometimes-frozen story-line of *The January Man* spring to life.



Kevin Kline and Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio are involved in the search for a serial killer and with each other in *The January Man*.

THE STORY THAT WON



The Mid-December Mystery was won by Richard Gilmore. Honorable mentions go to Creek, Wisconsin; Don

Patricia Bragg of Graham, Texas; Harriet Braun of Buffalo Grove, Illinois; Patricia Adair of Warsaw, Indiana; Alice Robbins of East Lyme, Connecticut; Janet Basil of Tampa, Florida; Janet Bencivenga of Milford, Connecticut; John Utech of Ottumwa, Iowa; Juli Parker of High Point, North Carolina; R. Stewart of Oakland, California; and Henry F. Smith of Miami, Florida.

rious Photograph contest more of Tampa, Florida. Peggy Kaminsky of Oak Shaffer of Belmont, California.

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BIRDS OF A FEATHER by Richard Gilmore

"I hate this stakeout."

"Sid, boy, you gotta hang in there. This is big. We crack this case, we put our new detective agency in the papers. The publicity is worth millions. Big-time clients. Big bucks."

"I understand that, Marti, but maybe couldn't the local cops do the stakeout?"

"They ain't got the class. They ain't cunning like us."

"Really?"

"Hey, would I kid my partner?"

"An' you think this'll work?"

"Sure thing. Sooner or later, the guys that stole the other half of that bridge are gonna come back for the rest of it. Wham! We nail 'em."

"An' you think these disguises will work?"

"Sure thing. What looks more natural than a couple of flamingos standing by the water?"

"Thanks, Marti. I feel a lot better now."

"Stick with me, partner; next week we'll be peacocks."

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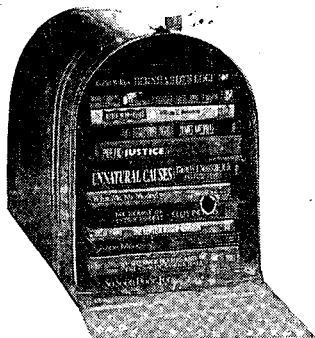
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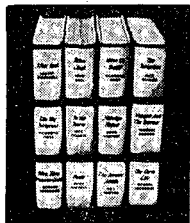
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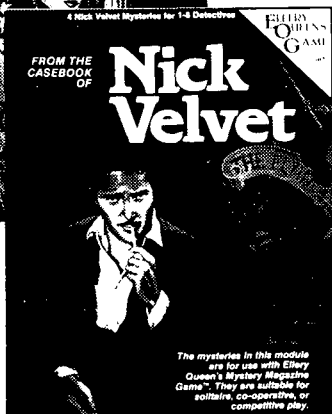
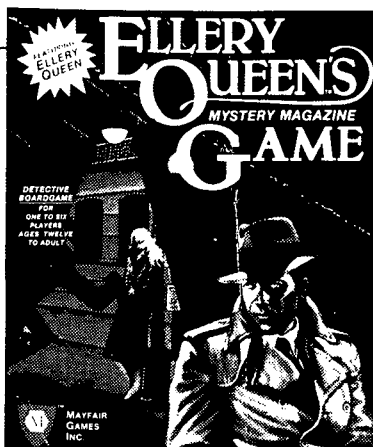
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